

#### MODERNISM AND HOMER

This comparative study crosses multiple cultures, traditions, genres, and languages in order to explore the particular importance of Homer in the emergence, development, and promotion of modernist writing. It shows how and why the Homeric epics served both modernist formal experimentation, including Pound's poetics of the fragment and Joyce's sprawling epic novel, and sociopolitical critiques, including H.D.'s analyses of the cultural origins of twentieth-century wars and Mandelstam's poetic defiance of the totalitarian Stalinist regime. The book counters a long critical tradition that has recruited Homer to consolidate, champion, and, more recently, chastise an elitist, masculine modernist canon. Departing from the tradition of reading these texts in isolation as mythic engagements with the Homeric epics, Leah Flack argues that ongoing dialogues with Homer helped these writers to mount their distinct visions of a cosmopolitan postwar culture that would include them as artists working on the margins of the Western literary tradition.

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## MODERNISM AND HOMER

The Odysseys of H.D., James Joyce, Osip Mandelstam, and Ezra Pound

LEAH CULLIGAN FLACK

Marquette University





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For Matt, Lucy, and Owen





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### Series editors' preface

In the constantly evolving genealogies that we construct to explain contemporary cultures, Modernism is too often a fixed point - reduced and simplified into a set of features that can be easily referenced and assimilated. The incurious assimilation of modernism has included pat, received ideas about the way in which modernist authors read and responded to the classics of Greek and Roman literature and art. Selective culling from the rich and heterogeneous corpus of literary modernism has flattened and blunted our understanding of the complex motivations of modernist authors in going to classical authors and texts, and the multifarious ways in which they related them to the twentieth century. As a result, we risk becoming blind to the density of this movement that styled itself at a weary, rebellious, and quirky angle to the received tradition of European literature and culture. What is more, there is little room in this onedimensional picture for the diachronic shifts that took place in the works of modernist authors over decades of their engaging with and thinking about the meaning of classical antiquity for their contemporary world. A clutch of well-known and well-worn quotations serve as shorthand for a vast and immensely varied output (some of which remains unpublished). Such falsely familiar loci of modernist classical reception would include Ezra Pound's quotable line on civilization as "an old bitch gone in the teeth" in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (1920), T. S. Eliot's remarks in 1923 on the mythic method that Joyce employed in *Ulysses*, or Eliot on Virgil as "the classic of all Europe" in a lecture to the Virgil Society in 1944.

Within the complex spectrum of modernist classical receptions that includes Greek and Latin epic, Greek lyric poetry, and Greek tragedy – to name only the three most obvious genres – Homer looms largest of all

We capitalize "Modernism" here to signal a received and simplified tradition about what modernism is. Leah Flack does not capitalize 'modernism' and 'modernist', and for the remainder of this Preface we follow her cue.



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and has come to serve as the icon and emblem for modernism's response to the Classics. Moreover, this modernist Homer tends to be associated, overwhelmingly, with Joyce's *Ulysses*. The visibility of the canonical, Joycean Homer has obscured the subtleties and complexities of Homeric reception in other works of literary modernism and the dialogues that modernist authors had with themselves and with each other over the epics of Homer.

Surveying this tradition, it requires effort and ingenuity to interpret the Homer of modernism afresh and to transport readers back to a time at which these responses to Homer were yet to be worked out. Leah Flack's book Modernism and Homer: The Odysseys of H.D., James Joyce, Osip Mandelstam, and Ezra Pound, the second book to be published in the series "Classics after Antiquity," performs just such a work of transportation. Working with four major authors from the canon of international literary modernism, Flack reconstitutes our understanding of what Homer meant for these authors and how their answer to this question has shaped the possibilities for Homeric reception in our own era. She offers readers a dynamic model for interpretation. On one plane, a comparative, synchronic approach enables Flack to explore both the differences and affinities between the Homeric receptions in these four modernist authors. This is combined with a diachronic approach that reveals shifts over time within individual authors' conceptions of Homer, as well as ways in which they responded to each other's "Homers."

Within the supple interpretative framework that this approach affords, Flack reveals the divergent ways in which the presence of Homer in modernist authors was read by contemporary critics and defenders. For instance, in Chapters 1 and 3 (on Pound and Joyce, respectively), Flack examines how defenders of Pound and Joyce exploited the status of Homer as a venerable, obscure, and remote classic to argue for the aesthetic and political respectability of their respective authors. Alongside this deployment of Homer as a figure of validation by supporters of the modernist project, Flack shows how Joyce and Pound offer an engagement with Homer that is far from apolitical. Through her study of Joyce, Pound, and their critics, Flack shows the complexities of what it meant to evoke Homer in the first half of the twentieth century, during, between, and after its devastating wars.

The picture that emerges in *Modernism and Homer* is one that is alert to lively contradictions: within the same works, Homer can be a vehicle for high culture, an emblem of staid tradition, a means for exposing humbug, a tool for political resistance and cultural critique, and a source



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of cryptic – sometimes incoherent – meanings and symbols. Some of the most enthralling discussions are those where Flack shows how authors whose engagements with Homer are often viewed as impenetrably allusive, positioned their responses to Homer squarely outside of academic traditions and on the wrong side of expert knowledge. As Flack writes in the Introduction, "Their writing vitally depends on accidents, mistakes, distortions, and creative misreadings" (p.10 below). Another fertile source of contradiction that emerges in Flack's study is the ambivalence of Homer as a Western classic, whose works are implicated in the crisis of modern civilization, but which, when read afresh and against the tradition, also pose a source of critique and ways through civilization's messy impasse.

Homer and Modernism is characterized by Flack's eye for the idiosyncrasies in modernist receptions of Homer and the range and versatility of the ways in which H.D., Joyce, Mandelstam, and Pound read and use Homer in their work. In Chapter 5 ("What song is left to sing? All song is sung': H.D., Homer, modernism"), Flack analyzes H.D.'s unpublished journals as context for the long poem Helen in Egypt, to cast new light on the long arc of H.D.'s classical poetry (from roughly 1910 to 1959). Flack's discussion of H.D. working through and puzzling over her sustained dialogue with literary modernism, the relationship between modernism and the classics, and her own original and peculiar position within this tradition well beyond the conventional terminus of modernism, poses an exciting new genealogy for modernist Homeric receptions.

The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam does not usually keep company with H.D., Joyce, and Pound. In Chapter 2 ("The reading of Homer was transformed into a fabulous event': Mandelstam's modernist Odyssey"), Flack reveals how Homeric epic offered Mandelstam a shifting, and elusive resource to convey insights into the conditions of poetry and the poet in Stalinist Russia. Mandelstam's Homer is an underground Homer, and his approach eschews unity or any stable conception of Homeric epic, while at the same time clinging to these epics as a fragile raft against the constant threat of censorship and persecution. As Flack writes in her Conclusion to Chapter 2, "tracing Mandelstam's battle against obliteration and oblivion in these poems suggests one of the most profound poetic and human achievements in the Homeric tradition spanning the ancient and modern worlds" (p.94 below).

In the case of Pound, Flack sets up a fascinating dialogue and relay between the Homer of "early" Pound and the Homer of "late" Pound, split across Chapters 1 and 4. In Chapter 4, Flack examines Pound's correspondence with W. H. D. Rouse, with whom Pound corresponded

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and collaborated over the former's prose translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, to cast new light on Pound's conception of Homeric translation and adaptation in his own poetry and in the modernist tradition, more broadly (Chapter 4 –"ACTUALITY gets in front of Olympus': Pound's late visions and revisions of Homer").

In place of the received and familiar Homer of modernism, Flack brings out the complexity and fragility of modernists' engagements with Homer and the many different forms and directions that they took. What is more, this far-reaching study extends beyond the (already expansive) scope of the four authors under discussion. In her Conclusion, Flack underscores the importance of viewing modernism's Homer in an international context, and draws parallels with the Homer of Modern Greek Literature in the works of Cavafy, Seferis, and Kazantzakis. She also suggests ways in which her expanded account of the Homer of modernism might relate to subsequent Homeric receptions, including the Afro-modern politics of adaptation in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952), the postcolonial reception of Homer in Walcott's The Odyssey: A Stage Version (1993), the postmodern Homer of Milan Kundera, and feminist responses to Homer in Louise Glück, Rosanna Warren, and Margaret Atwood. Flack's stunning book reveals the consistent commitment to newness in modernist approaches to Homer and helps to explain why subsequent traditions return again and again to Homer and to the Homer of the modernists. Like all ambitious and original works, it redefines its subject, the terms, and the material for discussion, revealing new dimensions to canonical works and bringing key documents, which bear fresh witness to modernist Homeric receptions, out of the shadows. This is at once an original and impressively learned book on the many dimensions of Homer in literary modernism as well as an exciting contribution to the study of twentieth-century classical receptions writ large.

> Emily Greenwood, Alastair Blanshard, and Shane Butler



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#### Acknowledgements

believe that there remained something new and important to say about Homer in the modernist imagination. I am especially grateful to Sarah Keller and Gayle Rogers - wonderful scholars and friends whose work I admire very much. Both have challenged me to refine my thinking and expression at crucial moments in this project's development. Early on, I benefitted from the support of Joanne Valin, whose generous readings helped me when I was most at sea in my thinking, Kathryn Milne, Amanda Sisselman, Helen Hoguet LaCroix, and the other members of the cabin. I also thank David Wick for his help with the Latin translations in Chapter 1, Ioulia Ionina for checking the Russian material in the appendix, and Karen Leick for her brilliant work on Ezra Pound and her generous advice. I have presented portions of this work at conferences and have received excellent feedback from many colleagues and friends. In particular, I thank Bridget Murnaghan, Efi Spentzou, Justine McConnell, Celia Marshik, Greg Baker, Anne Fogarty, Paige Reynolds, Enda Duffy, Demetres Tryphonopoulos, Ronald Bush, David Moody, Peter Liebregts, Sean Latham, and David Scourfield.

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I dedicate this book to my family – to Lucy, Owen, and Matt. True to her name, Lucy has been a light in my life. Lucy, when people used to ask me how I could do any of this – have a full-time job, finish my doctoral degree, write a book – with a young child, I meant it when I said that I did all of this not despite you, but because of you. Owen came along just in time for the final stages of this book and has been a source of tremendous joy for all of us. I have learned so much about everything from Matt, and he always manages to make me laugh when I most need it. To Lucy, Owen, and Matt – thanks for understanding when I needed to leave you to work and for using love, care, and patience, time and again, to show me the way home.



## Abbreviations of frequently cited texts

ABC	Ezra Pound, ABC of Reading. New York: New Directions, 1934.
BL	Homer, The Odyssey. Translated by Samuel Butcher and
	Andrew Lang. New York: Collier Books, 1909.
C	Ezra Pound, <i>The Cantos</i> . New York: New Directions, 1972.
CCP	Osip Mandelstam, The Complete Critical Prose. Edited and
	translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link. Ann
	Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1997.
CP	H.D., The Collected Poems of H.D., 1912-1944. Edited by Louis
	Martz. New York: New Directions, 1983.
ET	H.D., End to Torment: A Memoir of Ezra Pound. New York:
	New Directions, 1985.
GK	Ezra Pound, Guide to Kulchur. New York: New
	Directions, 1970.
H	H.D., Helen in Egypt. New York: New Directions, 1974.
HD	H.D., Hermetic Definition. New York: New Directions, 1972.
Il	Homer, <i>Iliad</i> . Translated by Richmond Lattimore. University
	of Chicago Press, 2011.
JJ	Richard Ellmann, James Joyce. New York: Oxford University
	Press, 1982.
JJMU	Frank Budgen, James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses. Oxford
	University Press, 1972.
JSL	James Joyce, Selected Letters. Edited by Richard Ellmann. New
	York: Viking Press, 1957.
LE	Ezra Pound, <i>Literary Essays</i> . Edited by T. S. Eliot. New York,
	New Directions, 1935.
NT	Osip Mandelstam, The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip
	Mandelstam. Edited and translated by Clarence Brown. New
	York: Penguin Books, 1993.
Od	Homer, <i>The Odyssey</i> . Translated by Richmond Lattimore. New
	York: Harper Collins, 2009.

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	List of abbreviations of frequently cited texts xvii
PJ	Forrest Read, ed. Pound/Joyce Letters. New York: New
	Directions, 1967.
PSL	D. D. Paige, ed. Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907–1941. New
	York: New Directions, 1971.
RO	Homer, The Odyssey: The Story of Odysseus. Translated by
	W. H. D. Rouse. New York: New American Library, 1949.
SPo	Ezra Pound, Selected Poems. New York: New Directions, 1956.
SPr	Ezra Pound, Selected Prose 1909–1965. New York: New
	Directions, 1975.
SR	Ezra Pound, The Spirit of Romance. New York: New
	Directions, 1968.
U	James Joyce, <i>Ulysses</i> . New York: Modern Library, 1992.
$U\!A$	Don Gifford and Robert Seidman, Ulysses Annotated. Berkeley:
	University of California Press, 1988.
ur-C	Ezra Pound, Ur-Cantos, in Ronald Bush, The Genesis of Ezra
	Pound's Cantos, 53-73. Princeton University Press, 1976.