Introduction: Modernist Poetry in History

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What, When, and Where was modernism? Is modernism a period or a paradigm, an era or a style? Is modernism solely the product of metropolitan modernity, or equally of local, even peripheral, spatialities? Is modernism an 'international' or even transnational phenomenon, or is it wedded to notions of cultural nationalism and regional identity? Does modernism mark a moment of avant-garde rupture with its late nineteenth-century poetic antecedants, or a reinflection and continuation of their preoccupations? Is Pound's famous injunction, to 'Make it new!', a revolutionary or a reactionary call-to-arms?[1] Arguably, these binaries are specious, and modernism is better understood, in the words of one of the great late modernist set-pieces, Wallace Stevens's 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' (1942), as 'not a choice / Between excluding things. It was not a choice / / Between, but of'.[2] After all, the emphasis in 'Make it new' falls as much on the 'it' of the tradition in need of renewal as on the innovation of the 'new' itself.

In what follows, modernist poetry is understood as having its roots in the *fin de siècle* even as it reflects and refracts the climate of the new century, as an affair of the city and imperial centre, and of what Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid termed the 'stony limits' of the periphery; and as a variegated field of formal experiments, whether iconoclastic rejections of the past or embattled recuperations of it.

I

Anglophone modernist poetry, like the *Titanic*, was launched and fitted-out in 1911–12, the product, as was the White Star Liner, of American, British, and Irish interests. In 1911, the American poet

H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) had re-encountered in London Ezra Pound, fellow-expatriate and former intimate, and been introduced to her future husband, the English writer Richard Aldington. In 1912, the recent poetry of this close-knit London-based, transatlantic nexus was christened *Imagisme* by Pound, who would vigorously proselytise on its behalf until exiting the movement in 1914 to enter the 'Great London Vortex' of Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist movement, the short-lived but megaphonic mouthpiece of which was the magazine *Blast* (two issues, 1914–15).

In 1912 and 1913 poems by Aldington and, in Pound's nomenclature, 'H.D. *Imagiste*', had appeared in the Chicago-based magazine *Poetry: A Magazine* (founded in 1912 by Harriet Monroe, for whom Pound acted as 'Foreign Correspondent'). These foundational texts were swiftly followed in the latter year, again in the pages of *Poetry*, by a disingenuously disinterested 'note' (attributed to F. S. Flint[3]) on the tenets of 'Imagisme', accompanied by Pound's mildly pugnacious 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste'. Yet Pound had already declared the arrival of *Les Imagistes* in a prefatory note to 'The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme', which he appended to his 1912 collection *Ripostes*, published shortly before Aldington's 'Three Poems' appeared in *Poetry*. In so doing, Pound brings Imagism into being by means of what is tantamount to a performative utterance, while simultaneously acknowledging a precursor in the poetry and poetics of Hulme and his 'forgotten school of 1909'[4] (which had included Flint and Pound), whose base of operations had been the Tour Eiffel restaurant off Tottenham Court Road in Soho. Imagism's pre-history in Hulme's splinter group (it had 'seceded' from the far more sedate Poets' Club) is further substantiated by Hulme's paper 'Romanticism and Classicism' (which may date from 1909 or, more probably, 1911–12[5]), which advocates a proto-Imagist visuality and concreteness in the course of cheerfully writing the death-notice of 'romanticism'. By 1908–9, Hulme and other members of the 'school', including the Irish poet Joseph Campbell, were experimenting – after the examples of Whitman and French *vers librists* – with the rhythms of free verse. In a further regress, Hulme's group had tangential connections with the Rhymers' Club

(1890–c. 1904), founded by W. B. Yeats and the Anglo-Welsh Ernest Rhys.[6] The latter gathering at the Cheshire Cheese pub in London's Fleet Street was – in the strong Celticism of a number of its members and its affiliations to decadence – imbricated in the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth century, even as it looked back both to the example of Baudelaire and French symbolism.[7]

Imagism thus provides a self-declared point of origin for poetic modernism as well as a micronarrative of the broader transnational exchanges and tensions which would come to define the movement after Pound. Unlike the *Titanic*, Imagism successfully crossed the Atlantic, when Amy Lowell took the helm of what was now dubbed 'Amygism' by a disenchanted Pound. For all that the verbal and emotional economy of the Imagist poem makes it the verse equivalent of a *techné* of modernity like the telegram, however, Imagism is also the product of its own prehistories: the Sapphic fragment and the seventeenth-century Japanese haiku; the decadent and *symboliste* literatures of the European *fin de siècle*; and the phenomenological aesthetic – or 'Significant Form' – of Paul Cézanne's canvasses.

Notwithstanding modernism's almost compulsive preoccupation with periodicity and placement – noteworthy examples include Pound's 'Date Line', his 1934 introduction to *Make it New*, and the dateline with which James Joyce concludes *Ulysses: Trieste-Zurich-Paris, 1914–1921* – the history of modernist poetry, like its locations, is far from easily fixed. Conventionally, 1922 (the publication date of both *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*) is considered the high watermark of 'high' modernism, albeit that 1923 (the year in which Stevens's *Harmonium*, William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and Mary Austin's *American Rhythm* appeared) could be considered the *annus mirabilis* of American poetic modernism.[8] The publication history of Pound's *Cantos* is perhaps a surer indicator of the long march of modernism: inaugurated in 1917, with the publication of 'Three Cantos', the project comes to a close of sorts in the *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX–CXVII* (1969). Pound's 'poem including history' is also a poem including the history of modernist poetry.[9] Moreover, expanding its temporal parameters to encompass modernism's prehistories, Flint's/Pound's

history of *Imagisme* places its practitioners in a 'tradition' which encompasses Sappho, Catullus, and Villon. In doing so, Pound and Flint arguably anticipate Wai Chee Dimock's theory of 'deep time', according to which chronology – the domain of literary history – is ruptured by transhistorical trajectories ('deep time') which cut across national borders and periodising boundaries alike. For Dimock, the epic spiral or vortex of Pound's *Cantos* constitutes a veritable blueprint for such temporal dynamics.[10] Yet many modernist philosophies of history of the post-First World War period, including Spengler's cycles and Yeats's gyres, are no less compatible with our contemporary critical *zeitgeist*. Yeats's *A Vision* (1925, 1936) and related poems, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and, later in the century, David Jones's *The Anathemata* (1952), Charles Olson's *Maximus* poems (1950–c. 1970), Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* (1965), and Kamau Brathwaite's *X/Self* (1987) are underpinned by historiographies which scramble a genealogical line of descent through substituting a synchronic for a diachronic model of literary history in which the past powerfully interpellates itself into the present. Arguably, a theory of 'deep time' is already implicit in modernist literary criticism; to take two very different examples, Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) and Van Wyck Brooks's 'On Creating a Usable Past' (1918) are manifesto-essays which reveal modernism's own radical reconfiguration of literary tradition and of its own temporal imaginary. Both Eliot and Brooks are resurrection men who pick among the post-war rubble of tradition for signs of life, checking the dead poets of the past (Shakespeare, in Eliot's case, and Herman Melville in Brooks's) for vital signs. Indeed *The Waste Land*, that monument of the 'high' modernism of the early 1920s, is assembled from the shards and fragments of the immediate post-war present, the early modern era, and of antiquity. The Imagist experiment itself, like its Vorticist successor, was a vector of both transhistorical and transnational exchange, like the London of the early twentieth century: imperial node and centre of operations for anticolonial nationalist and feminist movements, London was the hub both of established literary convention and its avant-garde discontents.[11]

On the one hand, then, Imagism's centenary brings modernist poetry into focus as a literary historical period, albeit one the legacy of which would continue through two world wars and into the era of decolonisation. On the other, the unevenness with which Anglo-American modernism would develop into its post-Second World War, postcolonial versions and subversions had been a feature of pre-First World War transatlantic modernism or proto-modernism too. In contrast to England's Yellow Nineties, the United States experienced, at the turn of the nineteenth century into the new, American Century, the Gilded Age, in which the cultural veneer of the Genteel Tradition gilded the edges of the brash New World narrative of progress and nation-building. Where Europe faced imperial decline, with its last-gasp, Old World aesthetic of excess and enervation, America found itself on the cusp of empire. The absence, Stateside, of decadence would entail the belated absorption in the US of the poetics and postures of the *fin de siècle* – in the 'riot of gorgeousness' of Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* (1923), for instance, and in the figure of the queer black dandy who strikes his Wildean pose in a good deal of Harlem Renaissance writing of the 1920s.[12]

The European art-invasion precipitated by the Armory Show (the International Exhibition of Modern Art, held in New York City's 69th Regiment Armory in 1913) – which is often cited as an originary moment in American poetic, as much as visual, modernism – had prompted an exponential development of American modernist poetry after 1913. The phenomenon which Rebecca Beasley terms 'interdisciplinary modernism' is the product in part of the Armory Show, at which Gertrude Stein was introduced to the American reading public with the sale of her *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia* (1912) at the exhibition. According to Alfred Stieglitz, in yet another foundational dateline, the exhibition he mounted of Cézanne at his *291* gallery in Manhattan in 1910 had instantiated American Imagism. Indeed, Marsden Hartley, the poet-painter who was associated both with the German *Blaue Reiter* group of artists and with the Stieglitz circle, identified Cézanne and Whitman as 'the prophets of the new time', as the twin gurus of American modernism. Hartley's claim signals a wider recovery of Whitman as a precursor

for what Harriet Monroe would term the 'New Poetry' (tellingly, *Poetry* magazine's motto is taken from Whitman). For Van Wyck Brooks, a founding-editor of the New York little magazine *Seven Arts*, Whitman was a 'precipitant' for the poets of his generation, on both sides of the Atlantic. Whitman, whose self-appointed task was 'To formulate the Modern' ('Thou Mother with thy Equal Brood'), and who, in 'The United States to Old World Critics' had taught 'the lessons of the concrete', would be venerated as a shamanic poet-chief and creator of an autochthonous American Imagism, having earlier influenced the development of Irish and British poetry from Yeats to D. H. Lawrence.[13]

II

If the origins of modernism constitute a *mise en abyme* or well-nigh infinite recession, its endings reveal other temporal slippages. When did modernism end, if indeed it has ended? Poetic modernism demands the longer view of a literary history that encompasses the movement's origins and close imbrication with its antecedants, the modernist moment of the 1920s, and poetic modernism's legacies and afterlives. Clearly, the later careers of poets such as Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams are more than a footnote to the narrative of modernism. The First World War, although a defining event in that story, did not instantiate modernism, and neither did the Second World War bring it to its conclusion: on the contrary, the later conflict marks a moment of 'transmodernism'.[14] Likewise, the careers of poets influenced by first-generation modernism, and in particular by Eliot – W. H. Auden and other 'Thirties' writers, Dylan Thomas and poets associated with the New Romanticism of the 1940s – continued into the 1950s and 1960s. In America, the subterranean 'Other Tradition'[15] represented by Pound and Williams would emerge in the open or projective forms of the Black Mountain school and the New American Poetry of the 1960s as a whole. In its turn, the New American Poetry, especially in Donald Allen's 1960 anthology of that title, would impact on the British Poetry Revival of the 1970s (vide J. H. Prynne and Tom

Raworth). The work of Louis Zukofsky and Stein would inform the so-called Language writing of the 1970s and '80 s (including Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and Lyn Hejinian) in its abjuration of lyric form and 'voice' in favour of procedural modes of composition. Marjorie Perloff's 2001 study posits a *Twenty-First Century Modernism*, while Jahan Ramazani and others have charted the creolised manifestations and appropriations of modernism in the postcolonial poetries of Africa, India, and the Caribbean.

The complex spatial and temporal transmissions of modernist poetry thereby offer a model for what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define as the fractal and motile operations of the 'rhizome'. The history of modernist poetry as it is construed in this volume is, in effect, an antigenealogy, in which 'Transversal communications between different lines scramble the genealogical trees'.[16] Yet the fact that, uniquely, modernism in its critical reception is inextricably entwined with the evolution and institutionalisation of the discipline of English Studies makes it difficult to see the trees for the wood.[17] Notwithstanding the genre-bending quality of modernist artworks – most evident in the modernist manifesto's double function as artefact and polemic – Eliot's influence on the New Criticism is a case in point of the way in which the multiplicity of poetic modernisms has been obscured. Eliot, or at least as the New Critics tended to construe him, secured poetry's place as a privileged genre, and fostered the fetishised notion of the poem as an autotelic and impersonal artwork. With the eclipse of the New Criticism by poststructuralism at the turn of the 1960s, the narrow understanding of the modernist poem as a well-wrought urn arguably resulted in a lessening of critical interest in the modernist poets, some of whom, such as Stevens, would be recuperated by virtue of their recoding as belated romantics.[18]

The subsequent opening up of the canon across the discipline of English has generated new or renewed attention to modernist poets whose gender and ethnicity differentiate them from the so-called 'men of 1914', to which the burgeoning critical interest in Mina Loy and Claude McKay, among many others, attests. One significant consequence of this is that the reiterated charge of modernism's

elitism has been exposed as something of a red herring or false binary, as the phenomenon of 'middlebrow modernism' attests.[19] Since the 1990s, what would become known as the 'New Modernist Studies', in line with English Studies as a whole, has tended to substitute the formalist preoccupations of earlier criticism with an increased attention to historical context. This has entailed the investigation of the materiality and textual transmission of modernist texts, including the editors, publishers, and magazine culture so crucial to the dissemination of modernist literature, and the emergence of new fields of enquiry, such as the 'everyday' and 'eco-modernism'.[20]

While these recent developments are to be welcomed, one corollary has been an attenuated attention to what might be said to constitute a modernist *style*. It would be reductive, even absurd, to claim that there is a dominant or definitive mode of modernist poetics; indeed, modernism problematises stable generic taxonomies, frequently dithering boundaries between visual and verbal art, prose and poetry. That said, modernist poetry's formal self-reflexivity is clearly bound up with the 'linguistic turn' in the philosophy of language in the early twentieth century, as exemplified in the work of, most notably, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ferdinand de Saussure, for both of whom language constructs the referential world rather than providing a 'mirror of nature'.[21] There is a difference, that is, between modernism and the broader 'modern movement'.[22] Both register the shock of the new in terms of content and push at the envelope of conventional form; nevertheless, there is a distinction to be made between, for example, the Edwardian verse of John Masefield and the early poetry of Mina Loy. To take another instance, the representation of the Great War in David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937), a mixed prose and verse narrative underpinned by the 'deep time' of the 'mythical method' common to many modernist works, demands to be differentiated from the 'shell-shocked Georgianism' registered in the lyric war poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.[23] In light of this, arguments for a continuum between modernism and a broader 'modern movement' are, arguably, untenable.

III

Part I of *A History of Modernist Poetry* considers the formal innovations and intellectual contexts of modernism through a series of chapters analysing poetic techniques and devices, mythography and ethnography, politics, gender and race, and material manifestations of modernism in the shape of the periodical. Part II assesses modernism's origins in late nineteenth-century decadence, reconceived here as the matrix in which the aestheticism of modernism crystallises. Chronologically, this part of the *History* encompasses the period from the *fin de siècle* up to and including the First World War, registering the creative discrepancies that characterise the innovative poetries grouped under the umbrella term 'modernism'. Individual chapters cover the burgeoning poetic movements of these years, among them the Georgian revolt and its avant-garde antagonists Imagism and Vorticism, and the seminal early work of major modernist poets, specifically Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and H.D. Part III extensively surveys the principal achievements in modernist poetry from the 1920s to the decolonising movements of the 1960s and after. This part of the *History* begins with the avant-garde writings of Stein and Loy. The chapters that follow encompass the mid-career and later poetry of Eliot and Pound and the New World modernisms of their contemporaries, Williams, Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Hart Crane, among others, and the Afromodernism of the Harlem Renaissance. Due consideration is given to three important groupings in American poetic modernism: the Objectivism of the 1930s and after, and the Black Mountain and Beat Generation poets of the 1950s and 1960s. This part concludes with a consideration of modernism between the wars; the important contribution made by non-metropolitan poets to innovative writing of the period; and post-colonial poetry's creative adoption and adaptation of modernism. The *History* concludes with an account of the aftermath of modernism and the challenges posed by the remarkable legacy bequeathed by poetic modernism to neo-avant-garde writers working in its wake.

The six chapters in Part I of the history provide essential intellectual and/or material contexts for understanding modernist poetry.

Fiona Green's opening chapter on modernism and form addresses the formal demands and complexities characteristic of the modernist poetic artefact, using Pound's early cantos, the Stevens of *Harmonium*, and Moore's poetry of the 1920s and '30s as exempla. Green intervenes in what can seem overly programmatic accounts of modernist poetics, noting that poems are legible as the fingerprints of individual makers. Drawing on Susan Sontag's thinking about the closely related term 'style', the chapter seeks out these individuating aspects of form as signatures of the making self. Michael Bell's chapter demonstrates that the mythic precoccupations, as much as the formal devices of modernist poetry, challenge its readers. Bell's chapter traces the mythical turn taken by many modernist poets with reference to its romantic and post-romantic philosophical underpinnings, as articulated in the writings of Matthew Arnold, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, J. G. Frazer, and Martin Heidegger. Having differentiated between those modernists who deploy a 'mythical method' and those whose work embodies mythopoeia, Bell sets out some of the principal modalities of modernist myth-making by attending to a range of work from Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Stevens, H. D., and Lawrence, to Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Michael Tratner's chapter investigates modernist poetry's negotiations with the emergent politics of the twentieth century, with reference to the radical and the reactionary ideological discourses which inflect and, in some cases, deeply preoccupy modernist poetics. In Tratner's analysis, politics did not cause the new art, although many poets were involved in political movements; rather, politics and art were implicated with each other as competing or complementary processes of change. The nexus of modernist poetry, sexuality, and gender is addressed in Georgia Johnston's chapter, which offers a fresh appraisal of the ways in which sexuality and gender indelibly mark the work of modernist poets, male and female, canonical and neglected, specifically Yeats, Eliot, H.D., Stein, and Stevie Smith. Johnston examines the ways in which modernist poems deploy cultural mythologies to define sexuality, then reinscribe sexuality and gender through self-mythologising. The chapter emphasises the material and linguistic sexual politics of the period,