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Sam Shere, "Ezra Pound." Portrait taken in Washington, D.C.
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The Making of Modern American Poetry: Four Aspects

BY ROBERT E. SPOO

Modernism is easier to dislike than to escape. Fifty years defunct even by a stretched estimate of its *floruit*, its attitudes and techniques remain intimately with us, having settled upon our everyday life like a fine, invisible dust. Where modernism was once a ferment of movements and egos, it is now a way of seeing so complete and accustomed that the cubistic assaults of advertising and the lyrical allusiveness of our entertainment and fashion industries pass virtually unnoticed. Or if we do become conscious of these strange media with which we share our lives, it is because some clever Barnum of Madison Avenue or the academy has re-packaged them as “postmodernism” and invited us to savor as new a fare we have never been without. Modernism is a little like the Freud of Auden’s elegy, a whole climate of opinion.

The “making” of modern American poetry may be too tame a phrase for such a convulsive movement, though it was a movement very much willed and “made.” Ezra Pound’s leonine roar—“It is after all a grrreat littttery period”—gives some idea of how things struck a contemporary in late 1921 (he was toasting T. S. Eliot at the end of their collaborative editing of *The Waste Land*).¹ Dislocating language into new meanings, carving the new wood, raiding the inarticulate, singing beyond the genius of the sea, all these more vigorous images occurred to modern poets as ways of figuring their art. Perhaps fifty years from now a more placid set of metaphors will have gained currency—the birth of modernism, the rise of post-Victorian poetry, the pre-postmodern condition—but at this point it still seems right to speak of violent agency, of a fight

¹ Ezra Pound, letter of 24 December 1921 to T. S. Eliot, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988); vol. 1, p. 499.

to the death with the forces of reaction. William Carlos Williams saw no reason to soft-pedal his struggles: "The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill."² This rage for a disorder that would herald a new, more habitable order took many forms in the years between 1910 and 1930, but four aspects seem to me especially compelling and representative: the forging of a new language, the creation of a usable past, the cultivation of difficulty, the search for an audience.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEW

My phrase is intentionally ambiguous, a little like Pound's rallying cry "make it new," where "it" might refer to the artist's medium or to the vision of reality projected by that medium—or to both. In any event, the poetry of the American modernists was seen as new, so new that many could not recognize it as poetry. It didn't *sound* like poetry. Where, after all, were the lofty sentiments, the love of God and nature, the patriotic anthems, the tremulous strains of the beautiful? That "the beautiful" might be a changing thing conditioned by culture and taste did not occur to scandalized reviewers of the period (though in the aftermath of modernism that lesson would be a little clearer). Again and again, antagonists of the new poetry insisted that they could find no loveliness in these works, only cacophony, eccentricity, obscurity, coterie snobbishness. Reviewers of Eliot's poetry up to *The Waste Land* and beyond were especially savage: "Beardsleyesque," "borrowing the greater number of his best lines," "a vagrant string of drab pictures," "a grunt would have served as well."³ More often the new poems were greeted by puzzled silence, an even crueller torture. The gratitude of the young William Carlos Williams for an intelligent or sympathetic review (which usually came from a friend and fellow poet like Marianne Moore) suggests that even American talent that had not sought transatlantic refuge could find itself in exile.

This impudent jangling *was* a new language, however, a language that retained just enough of the characteristics of earlier poetry to

² "Spring and All" (1923), in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, 2 vols. (New York: New Directions, 1986); vol. 1, p. 179.

³ For a survey of early reactions to Eliot's poetry, see C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (1964; reprinted New York: Harper & Row, 1966), especially chapter 5.

seem uncanny, mischievous, or downright satirical. The period between 1910 and 1930 was one of sustained aesthetic vandalism. Traditional genres were invoked only to be twisted into novelty or given an aura of unfamiliar familiarity reminiscent of the trompe l'oeil picture. Broken pentameters, incomplete sonnets, overwrought sestinas, ice-cold pastorals: modern poetry delighted in causing readers to do a double take. Yet all this rummaging among the materials of the past was more than a feverish prank. Modernists were trying to come to terms with a tradition that had, in their view, become encrusted with Victorian sentimentality and insincerity, tarnished by American commercialism and genteel artificiality. Only after the old forms had been fractured into newness could their original qualities be experienced by a modern reader. Williams thought of this as "an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from 'reality.'"⁴ That modernism survived its own shock tactics is a testimony to its deeper purposes and strengths.

Wallace Stevens is a poet whose language is always surprising, often whimsical and funny, yet remains rooted in the Romantic conception of the imagination of which he may be the last great exponent. "Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame," he winkingly informs a high-toned old Christian woman in his first volume of poems, *Harmonium*, published in 1923 when he was forty-four. That droll phrase, "supreme fiction," combines a faith in poetry's vitally metaphorical, world-shaping powers with a skeptical eye for its "still sustaining pomps," its intoxicating peacock tail. Stevens brought the rhythms of jazz and the energies of slapstick to a language he had learned from Shelley and the French Symbolists, and with his faultless ear for the legato line he turned all this inheritance to witty music:

The fops of fancy in their poems leave
Memorabilia of the mystic spouts,
Spontaneously watering their gritty soils.⁵

Without warning he might drop his metaphysical knitting and break

⁴ "Spring and All," in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1, p. 189.

⁵ "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage, 1984), p. 16.

into an imitation of a small-town brass band: "Proud of such novelties of the sublime, / Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk."⁶ He could be full of beans, this Hartford insurance executive, but no one since Coleridge has devoted more serious thought to the uses of the poetic imagination.

One of Stevens's personae confides, "I come as belle design / Of foppish line."⁷ T. S. Eliot, too, had a bit of the fin-de-siècle fop hidden beneath his black banker's jacket (in the early years of his expatriation he worked in Lloyds Bank in London). Eliot is a case of transcendentalism injected the wrong way, American piety become brooding, dandiacal mysticism. Like Jules Laforgue, the poet whose chilly mordancies he imitated, Eliot at times played the part of a perverse little Buddha, a self-lacerating Pierrot gone off to smoke pale cigarettes on Golgotha while admiring the unprecedented hues of a sunset. Even Dr. Williams, the New Jersey pediatrician, might occasionally fancy himself a naked Nijinsky dancing before a mirror—provided that the shades were drawn and the family still asleep (his poem "Danse Russe" depicts just such a matutinal *pas seul*). To be a serious poet in America at the turn of the century meant testing the limits of identity, donning the garb of genteel common sense by day but, like Stevens's "gloomy grammarians in golden gowns," putting on a different self with one's singing robes at night.⁸

If playing at poetry in a culture of go-ahead practicality involved, for men, a kind of emasculation, it could be equally disorienting for women. Growing up in a staid academic family in Pennsylvania, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) suffered the tortures of a self divided between proper Victorian daughter and intense, bookish Maenad. Her first volume of Imagist poems, *Sea Garden*, was published in 1916, five years after she had left America for Europe. These strange, impersonal lyrics, with their sheltered gardens alternating with wide

⁶ "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 59.

⁷ "The Weeping Burgher," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 61.

⁸ Ezra Pound, as usual, presents something of a flamboyant exception to the rule. He made no secret of his dandyism, and his velvet jacket, shock of red (some said blond) hair, and turquoise earring were well known in London by 1909. But he asserted his masculinity in other ways, notably in the histrionic ferocity of his critical opinions. *Punch* caught these contradictions nicely in a squib on "the new Montana (U.S.A.) poet, Mr. Ezekiel Ton" whose work blended "the imagery of the unfettered West, the vocabulary of Wardour Street, and the sinister abandon of Borgiac Italy" (*Punch, or the London Charivari* 136 [23 June 1909], p. 419).

shores and breaking waves, play out an elusive allegory of the expatriate conscience, the exhilarations of the rugged seashore competing with the temptations of a soft inland existence. H.D. captured her early confusions in a poignant autobiographical novel, *HERMIONE*, not published until 1981, twenty years after her death: "I am Her Gart, my name is Her Gart. I am Hermione Gart. I am going round and round in circles. . . . Nothing held her, she was nothing holding to this thing: I am Hermione Gart, a failure."⁹ Yet, like Hermione (whose story is continued in the recently published sequel, *Asphodel*), H.D. would flee the forest primeval for a productive career in Europe punctuated by intense relationships with both men and women.¹⁰ During her analysis with Freud in the 1930s, he pleased her by saying that she was a rare case of "perfect bisexuality." In one form or another, most of the expatriate writers harbored a "borderline" self (one of H.D.'s favorite words), a self inseparable from their accomplishments at the margins of poetic utterance.

The language of modernism travelled far in a very short time. Its revolt against what Kay Boyle called "all literary pretentiousness, against weary, dreary rhetoric, against all the outworn literary and academic conventions"¹¹ was zealous and costly, requiring the sacrifice of the very language that qualified as poetry. None of the poets I have mentioned began as an iconoclast; most of them spent years scraping academic romanticism from their tools before they were ready to do any serious work. Ten years before the first publication of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), Eliot was praising his school, Smith Academy in St. Louis, in the style of watered-down Keats: "Thou dost not die—for each succeeding year / Thy honor and thy fame shall but increase."¹² Pound's first volume of poems, published in 1908, is full of lines like "Ye blood-red spears-men of the dawn's array."¹³ As late as *Al Que Quiere!* (1917)—

⁹ H.D., *HERMIONE* (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 4.

¹⁰ See *Asphodel*, ed. Robert Spoo (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1992). H.D. composed *HERMIONE* and *Asphodel* in the 1920s during a period of intense autobiographical exploration. For various and complicated reasons, she did not try to publish these novels.

¹¹ Robert McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930*. With supplementary chapters and an afterword by Kay Boyle (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 336.

¹² T. S. Eliot, *Poems Written in Early Youth* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), p. 16. Recited by Eliot on Graduation Day at Smith Academy, 1905.

¹³ "To the Dawn: Defiance," originally published in *A Lume Spento* (1908), reprinted in *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Michael John King (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 43.

the volume in which Williams really began to find his voice—a quaint “Phoebus!” pokes his head among the poplars, though he tosses his golden locks only once before passing behind the clouds of a more idiomatic language.¹⁴ Shaking the dust of Romanticism from their feet was as difficult for these poets as forgetting modernism has been for writers since 1930. After all, how should one presume to begin?

THE SENSE OF THE PAST

The new is only an aspect of the old that has suffered eclipse. This might have been the motto of Pound and Eliot. In 1918 in *The Dial*—the New York literary magazine that four years later would publish *The Waste Land*—Van Wyck Brooks defined the predicament of young writers: “The present is a void, and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value. But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?”¹⁵ Although Brooks later attacked American expatriation (along with modernist poetry), his diagnosis here touched on the frustrations that gave rise to such a desperate remedy. Henry James, a venerable figure by the time Pound, Eliot, and H.D. reached foreign shores, had left America in search of social and historical nuance, to dwell among subtler folkways where one could drink in the tone of things without getting a bellyache. Expatriation is usually seen as a negative act, a Luciferian spurning of home and origin in a gesture antithetical to that of Du Bellay’s Ulysses, whose happy destiny was to return to Ithaca and live “entre ses parents le reste de son âge.” But the expatriate writers of the early twentieth century had a far more positive goal: to discover the new by creating a usable past.

This ambition is everywhere in the early work of Pound, whose poems seem a phantasmagoria of historical costuming: “Cino,” “Marvoil,” “Piere Vidal Old,” “Paracelsus in Excelsis,” “Of Jacopo del Sellaio,” “The Seafarer.” One of his favorite words, “perso-

¹⁴ “Metric Figure,” in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1, p. 66.

¹⁵ Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial* 64 (11 April 1918), p. 339.

nae," which he used as the title for a 1909 volume of verse and again in 1926 for his collected shorter poems, points to the act of historical resuscitation that is central to all his poetry: *per-sona*, literally an actor's "speaking through" the round O of a mask. "Winning the ghosts of yester-year" became a compulsive act of hospitality for Pound, and the dramatic monologue which he inherited from Browning and Tennyson was a favored means of conjuration, like the sacrifices Odysseus and his men offer to attract the prophesying spirit of Tiresias. Eliot, too, insisted that the voices of the dead must be made to sound in the ears of the living, that the individual talent in the present moment exists only by courtesy of "tradition," a way of bringing the past and present into fecund alignment, of drawing strength from one's chosen forbears.

Given to personae and masquerade himself, Eliot laid hold of the dramatic monologue and brushed its intrinsic ironies to fiery points of unforgiving light. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," set in a nightmarishly unreal city inhabited by neurasthenic mermaids and mermen, registers the voice of modern desperation and poses a problem for which Eliot would spend his life seeking solutions. When the monologue of "Prufrock" fragmented into the bewildering polylogue of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's sense of the past was revealed in all its urgency and complexity. In the cryptic, defunctive music of that long poem, the voices of the past, real and imagined, can be heard in disquieting counterpoint: Baudelaire, Marvell, Verlaine, Wagner, Tiresias, Madame Sosostris, the Fisher King, the hyacinth girl. These are not the typical elective affinities of the American writer of this period but the attitudes and stances of a poet assembling his own tradition lest he be enslaved by another man's. They reveal the American poet confecting a past, preparing an exile of the imagination. As Van Wyck Brooks said, "The creative past of this country is a limbo of the non-elect, the fathers and grandfathers of the talent of today."¹⁶ Although Eliot went far afield for his adoptive family, his purpose was to find among the "non-elect," among those passed over by the commercial tastes of his countrymen, a new and enabling pedigree.

William Carlos Williams, that stubborn stay-at-home, was of a decidedly different opinion. Snatching moments from his medical

¹⁶ Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," p. 340.

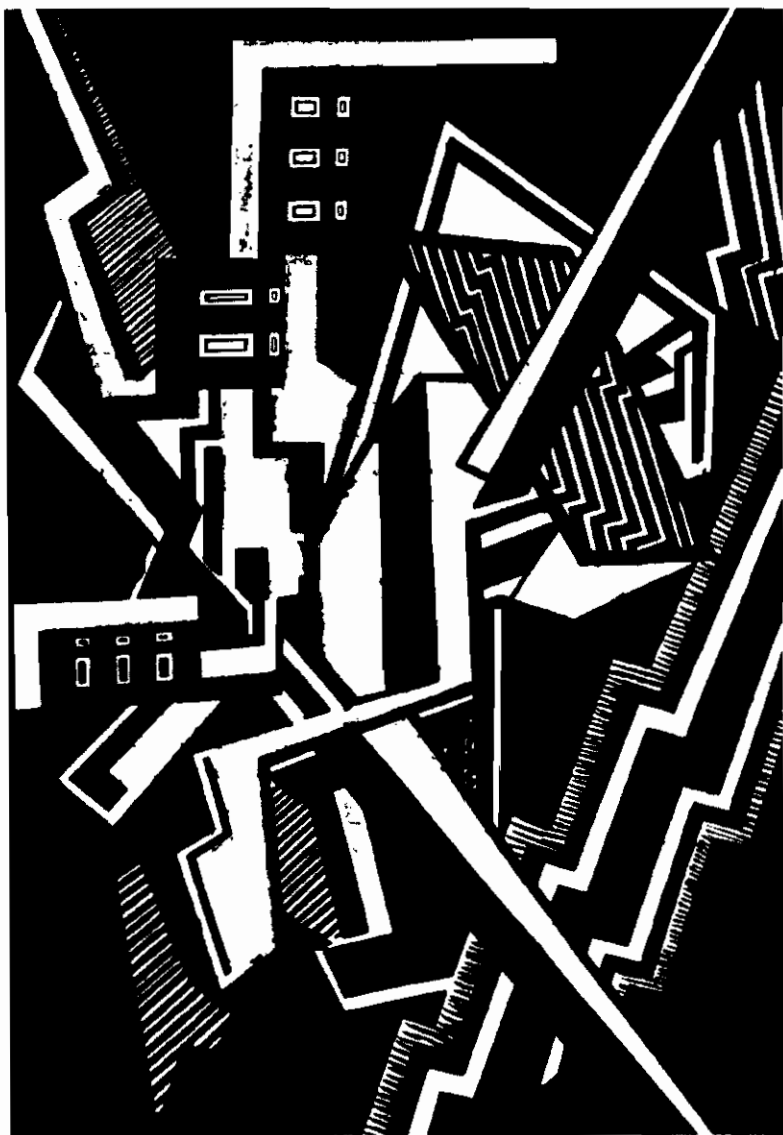


Photo: John Blaszewski

H. Sanders, "Atlantic City." Drawing from *BLAST: Review of the Great English Vortex*, No. 2 (July 1915), p. 57. Rare Books Division, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

practice to type out a poem, disciplining himself to write out the rhythms of the imagination after returning home exhausted from a maternity case, Williams folded his arms and refused to take part in any expatriation, either physical or spiritual. His heart's home was Rutherford, New Jersey, and its environs, and he nursed a perfect hatred for what he saw as Eliot's defection, and resented Pound's championing of the etiolated Anglophilia of this turncoat Prufrock. (Williams never admitted any distinction between Eliot and his famous persona.) Williams's favorite month was March, the one preceding cruellest April, and his tour de force of poetry and prose, *Spring and All* (1923), was published in the year following the appearance of *The Waste Land*, partly as a counterblast to the work Williams thought had perverted the new poetry of America, tempting it into pallid pedantries. In *Spring and All*, Williams thundered against "The Traditionalists of Plagiarism," an epithet he swung like a bloodaxe, taking aim at the very term Eliot had made his signature concept. Williams's poetry would be one of glimpsed and intercepted actualities, and it would celebrate the élan vital of the phenomena around him: a young Chinese laundryman, a pregnant black woman, the crowd at a ball game, the clangor of a fire engine in full career.

For many of the American modernists, the literary heritage of their nation was a dangerous junkyard where one had to step carefully, picking one's way "among mattresses of the dead," as Wallace Stevens's *Man on the Dump* imagines it. As a precautionary measure, when Pound decided to make his peace with Whitman, he did so in an un-Whitmanesque nine-line poem beginning, "I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman— / I have detested you long enough." Hardly a salaam before the good gray poet who had broken the new wood of American poetry, this sly, puckish handshake asserted the prerogatives of the moderns even as it acknowledged "one sap and one root" with the multitudinous progenitor.¹⁷ Yet Whitman's vitality and unsinkability are there in Pound, as if the young man from Hailey, Idaho, somehow needed the rough stock of his pig-headed forefather to carve the delicate figurines of Imagism.

Whitman and Emerson are everywhere in the self-reliant Wil-

¹⁷ Ezra Pound, "A Pact" (1913), in *Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, rev. ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), p. 90.

liams, from the expanding circles of the creative soul in his early long poem, "The Wanderer," to the impulsive, yawping "Ha!" that punctuates his verse, prose, and letters, a sort of wild-Indian whoop of the spontaneous ego. Williams had his own elective tradition, although in contrast to Pound and Eliot it was one that remained largely in the American grain: Columbus and his incorruptible faith in himself, the plain blunt courage of George Washington, Daniel Boone's ingenuous lust for the wilderness, Abraham Lincoln cradling the disunited States in his arms like a great mother. And there are surprises in Williams's national portrait gallery. One of his most fascinating essays is devoted to Edgar Allan Poe, not the Poe of gothic tales and tintinnabulous verse, but the methodical writer whose style sprang from a struggle with local conditions, refusing to abase itself before European models, the poet in whom a "ground" and the "strong sense of a beginning" emerge at last.¹⁸ The fact that Poe also thought of his literary contemporaries as plagiarists endeared him the more to Williams. (There is a nice paradox in Poe as the apostle of "locality," since his stories typically begin with dark disavowals of specificity: "I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia.")

Wallace Stevens's sense of the past is as elusive as his poems are difficult. Sometimes it seems to me that he has been influenced by everything but can be pinned down to nothing. The surfaces of his poems are as thickly slabbed as the modern paintings he admired (Williams too found in painting an analogue for his art), but they defy precise historical analysis in their relentlessly colorful philosophizing. Keatsian lushness, Coleridgean idealism, French Symbolism, Emersonian buoyancy, Whitmanian vistas of possibility, all these are present in Stevens's song, but they are dissolved and blended in a way that always yields the Stevens persona, the "major man" who encounters "the real that wrenches," "the essential prose" of life, and makes provisional, sometimes delightful meanings out of it. Stevens was a Yankee doodle dandy whose macaronic verse reveals a deep-seated eclecticism:

¹⁸ William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (1925; reprinted New York: New Directions, 1956), pp. 216ff.

Bellissimo, pomposo,
Sing a song of serpent-kin. . . .
Hang a feather by your eye,
Nod and look a little sly.¹⁹

Where Pound and Eliot urged a dialogue between past and present, Stevens spent his life provoking a confrontation between the imagining mind and wintry reality, and the poetry that results is one of exalted abstractness balanced by fanciful detail. His geography was as serenely unrooted as his history. He was always exploiting locality: Key West, Pascagoula, Havana, Geneva, Peking, Tehautepec. Yet these are regions of the mind more than parts of a world. With Stevens I am always asking, Where are we really?

THE FASCINATION OF WHAT'S DIFFICULT

In a detention camp outside Pisa in 1945, Ezra Pound, charged with treason against his native country, recalled one of the anecdotes of his late friend, William Butler Yeats:

“Beauty is difficult, Yeats” said Aubrey Beardsley
when Yeats asked why he drew horrors
or at least not Burne-Jones.²⁰

The verbal ambiguity is telling as Pound deploys it: beauty is difficult to achieve but also, once achieved, will be difficult to admire, especially if approached with conventional expectations. A taste for Pre-Raphaelite angels will give little purchase for understanding the grotesque androgynes of a decadent Beardsley. Beauty is difficult because if it is truly beauty it will have left conventional aesthetics behind, passed beyond the facile orthodoxies that win the crowd's applause. This is the exacting attitude shared by many modern writers, an attitude that made of their art a passionate search for a loveliness not yet come into the world but that also drew upon them the taunt that they were producing nothing but misshapen figments. Anticipating the reactions of critics, Pound

¹⁹ “The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade,” in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 103.

²⁰ “Canto 80,” in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1972; reprinted New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 511.



Photo: John Blazejewski

Walter Crane, Illustration for *The First of May: A Fairy Masque* (London: Henry Sotheran & Co., 1881), p. xxix.
The Graphic Arts Collections, Visual Materials Division,
Rare Books and Special Collections,
Princeton University Libraries.

confided to his patroness in 1910 that "Und Drang," a suite of difficult poems he had just completed, was "a 'modern' horror."²¹

For a poet such as Pound, difficulty was neither a trick à la mode nor a manufactured perversity, but a moral imperative. If life, particularly urban life, was to be honestly captured in verse, then the poet had no choice but to submit to the disfiguring pressures of his subject matter, the real. This is what T. S. Eliot meant when he said that "we can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*."²² *The Waste Land*, that great poem of the modern city, is a map of disorientations, a record of the way our experience of the world no longer accords with the seamless rhetoric and reassuring voice-over of earlier poetry. The American critic Yvor Winters accused Eliot and other modernists of surrendering to things as they are, of overvaluing emotional response and imitative form in their writing. Poets have a responsibility, he contended, to give a moral shape to reality and to upbraid that reality if it seems to present itself as a chaos.²³ Though not without complexity of his own, William Carlos Williams also reacted against what he saw as the gloomy pseudo-profundity of modern verse. His later battle cry, "no ideas but in things," summed up his campaign to render local conditions in clear, palpable verse. So much depended, after all, on a red wheelbarrow beside the white chickens that to waste one's talent trying metaphysical conclusions was an unpardonable abdication.

When world war broke out in the late summer of 1914, poets had more difficulty on their hands than they had bargained for. It was one thing to attend to the discords of the city and quite another to be present at the death groans of a civilization. For Henry James, the Great War destroyed all the fond illusions he and his generation had cherished: the march of progress, the spread of enlightenment, the advent of universal peace. James had thought the world to be gradually bettering, but in a famous letter written on the day England declared war he spoke of the prewar past as "the treacherous years." Six months later he complained that the subject mat-

²¹ *Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens: A Tragic Friendship, 1910-1912*, ed. Omar Pound and Robert Spoo (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1988), p. 60.

²² "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 65.

²³ See, for example, Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason* (Chicago: Sparrow Press, 1947), and *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1957).



Aubrey Beardsley, "Salomé with the Head of St. John the Baptist." A drawing to illustrate Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, but not used in the 1894 edition of the play. Drawing No. 97, Gallatin Aubrey Beardsley Collection. Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.

ter of his writing had become “*itself* utterly treacherous and false—its relation to reality utterly given away and smashed. Reality is a world that was to be capable of THIS—and how represent that horrific capability, *historically* latent, historically ahead of it?”²⁴ Here was a dilemma undreamed of in James’s aesthetic philosophy, a crisis of fictional representation, for to portray the pre-1914 world in all its naive optimism would in one sense be accurate, but in another sense it would ignore the submerged potentiality, the latent treachery, of those years.

The modernists’ cult of difficulty had at least shielded them from the kind of self-deception to which James was now forced to confess, and *les jeunes* (as Ford Madox Ford called the new writers) did not hesitate to fling their advantage in the teeth of the smug old men. These young connoisseurs of chaos had been accused of irresponsibility, but now they could boast that they had been the ones to register the early tremors of the cataclysm while their elders were congratulating themselves on imagined triumphs. The first issue of the super-modernist magazine *BLAST* appeared one month before England entered the war and contained work by Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Rebecca West, and others. In the second issue, published in July 1915 as a “War Number,” Pound permitted himself to gloat: “While all other periodicals were whispering PEACE in one tone or another . . . ‘BLAST’ alone dared to present the actual discords of modern ‘civilization,’ DISCORDS now only too apparent in the open conflict between teutonic atavism and unsatisfactory Democracy.”²⁵ Modern poets could now claim that their alleged pessimism had in fact been prescience; they were what Pound believed all vital poets to be, the antennae of their race. The modernists also wrote more directly of the War. In *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), Pound denounced the “botched civilization” that had sent so many “quick eyes . . . under earth’s lid.”²⁶ In 1917 Wallace Stevens wrote “The Death of a Soldier,” a lyric of austere beauty still not given its due as a war poem. Eliot’s “Gerontion” (1919) and *The*

²⁴ Letters of 4–5 August 1914 and 14 February 1915, in *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 vols. (1920; reprinted New York: Octagon Books, 1970); vol. 2, pp. 384, 446. James’s emphases.

²⁵ Ezra Pound, “Chronicles,” in *BLAST*, No. 2 (July 1915), ed. Wyndham Lewis (facsimile reprint, Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), pp. 85–86.

²⁶ *Personae*, p. 188.

6

BLAST

years **1837** to **1900**

Curse abysmal inexcusable middle-class
(also Aristocracy and Proletariat).

BLAST

pasty shadow cast by gigantic **Boehm**

(imagined at Introduction of **BOURGEOIS VICTORIAN VISTAS**).

WRING THE NECK OF all slok inventions born in
that progressive white waka.

BLAST

their weeping whiskers—hirsute

RHETORIC of **EUNUCH** and **STYLIST**—

SENTIMENTAL HYGIENICS

ROUSSEAUISMS (wld Nature cranks)

FRATERNIZING WITH MONKEYS

DIABOLICS—raptures and roses
of the erotic bookshelves
culminating in

**PURGATORY OF
PUTNEY.**

CHAOS OF ENOCH ARDENS

laughing Jennys
Ladies with Pains
good-for-nothing Bulneveres.

SNOBbish BORROVIAN running after GIPSY KINGS and ESPADAS

bowing the knee to
wild Mother Nature,
her feminine contours,
Unimaginative insult to
MAN.

DAMN

all these to-day who have taken on that Rotten Menagerie,
and still crack their whips and tumble in Piccadilly Circus,
as though London were a provincial town.

**WE WHISPER IN YOUR EAR A GREAT
SECRET.**

**LONDON IS NOT A PROVINCIAL
TOWN.**

We will allow Wonder Zoos. But we do not want the
GLOOMY VICTORIAN CIRCUS in
Piccadilly Circus.

IT IS PICCADILLY'S CIRCUS !

Waste Land (1922) are full of ghostly reverberations of the recent conflict.

One of the inescapable legacies of modernism is the widely held belief that poetry is by definition difficult, that in order to be poetry it must conceal its purposes behind an opaque code. This conspiracy theory of modern verse is very hard to refute—especially since it is partly true. The lyric mode with its uncompromising privacy continues to be a standard of contemporary poetry, despite the various counterrevolutions that have been staged since the modernists wrote: the chastened clarities of the Objectivists of the thirties, the neo-Whitmanian expansiveness of the Beats, the faux populism of current postmodern culture. The price we have paid for taking to heart modernism's revolt against obviousness is the loss, or the muting, of the poet's cultural voice; we have no Matthew Arnold to sing dirges over the ebbing tide of religious faith, no Longfellow to teach us our history, no Emerson to urge us to overcome our littleness and yield ourselves to the perfect whole. Our understandable distrust of smiling public men has reached to our poets as well, with the result that their work is hushed away in anthologies which our students eye warily.

FIT AUDIENCE THOUGH FEW

For all their flaunted contempt for the crowd, the modernists craved admiring readers. The problem was to get published, and, more pressing still, to survive while trying to put a volume together. It is sobering to think what might have happened to these writers had it not been for the vigorous support of patrons and publishers. The story of Joyce's *Ulysses* is in large part the story of a loyal patroness (Harriet Shaw Weaver) and a courageous publisher (Sylvia Beach). The American modernists were no less dependent on external largess. In 1910 Ezra Pound thought he had been transported to Aladdin's cave when Margaret Cravens, an American pianist he had only just met in Paris, promised him \$1,000 annually, with the proviso that he never reveal the source of his income. Cravens's stipends sustained him until she committed suicide two years later. The costs of printing Eliot's first volume, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), were privately absorbed by Pound's wife, Dorothy Shakespear. H.D. and her wealthy companion, Bryher, secretly arranged for the pub-

lication of Marianne Moore's first book, *Poems* (1921). And William Carlos Williams paid all or part of the printing costs of several early volumes.

Small presses, deluxe editions, manuscript collectors, tireless editors of little magazines, all these and more made up the network of altruism that sustained experimental writers in the 1920s and 1930s. But no amount of material help could supply the real desideratum, that fugitive vision of the lonely garret: a sympathetic reader, or what Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* calls "that ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia."²⁷ The need to communicate the new sensibility was as strong as the desire to keep it safely hidden from those who would maul and sully it. In 1907, while teaching Romance languages at Wabash College, Pound set up a howl as if from the depths of a dungeon:

I am homesick
After mine own kind that know, and feel
And have some breath for beauty and the arts.²⁸

The "kin" Pound ached for were not to be found in Crawfordsville, Hailey, Philadelphia, or any of the places he had known as home; he would have to go to Europe for that, and he did so in less than a year. But the act of self-exile could also make the search for spiritual kinship a complicated, guilt-ridden affair. When Eliot wanted to express a sense of solidarity with others stranded in the modern waste land, he resorted to Baudelaire's French: "You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"²⁹ So much of modernism is this, a *cri de coeur* under veils of allusion, an emotion wrapped in a verbal enigma.

The need for an understanding reader was a preoccupation of modern poets, but often this need was expressed indirectly in the symbolic world of their poetry. I sometimes feel that H.D.'s passionate prayers to the gods—"Hermes, Hermes," "Gods of the sea . . . hear me"—are idealizations of a communion despaired of in the dreary world of commercial publishing. Williams presents the

²⁷ *Finnegans Wake* (1939; reprinted New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 120.

²⁸ "In Durance," in *Personae*, p. 20.

²⁹ "The Waste Land," in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 55, line 76.

most moving example of a poet in search of an audience. Like Yeats who scorned the inhabitants of his unmannerly town and began writing for an imagined fisherman ("A man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream"), Williams proclaimed in *Spring and All* that "I love my fellow creature. Jesus, how I love him . . . but he doesn't exist! Neither does she. I do, in a bastardly sort of way." And then, sensing the desolation in which this idealistic outburst has left him, he wonders, "To whom then am I addressed? To the imagination."³⁰

Williams is the great poet of loneliness. He discovered as many ways to be creatively alone as Stevens found ways of looking at a blackbird.³¹ His wife and children are often shadowy figures in his poems, sketchy inhabitants of a household where he is the "happy genius" softly singing, "I am lonely, lonely" ("Danse Russe"). Williams is at his best as the eccentric paterfamilias, the domestic fantasist who is content to enjoy a private world richer than anyone knows. Yet as accustomed as he had become to conversing with his imagination, he still needed to humanize that process, to turn it into an encounter with another. His poems are filled with imaginary conversations, passionate apostrophes in which the poet attempts to explain himself and his purposes, sometimes to his "townspeople," sometimes to a woman resembling his mother or grandmother, as in the beautiful conclusion to "January Morning" (1917):

All this—
 was for you, old woman.
 I wanted to write a poem
 that you would understand.
 For what good is it to me
 if you can't understand it?
 But you got to try hard—
 But—³²

³⁰ *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1, p. 178.

³¹ Stevens' poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," was set to music by Lucas Foss and published in New York by Pembroke Music Co. in 1980.

³² *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1, pp. 103-104.

Then, catching himself in the posture of the lecturing bard, he halts and calls up a picture of young girls running along Park Avenue after dark, as if that homely image might somehow convey the meaning of his poetic vocation. No ideas but in things.



Modernism was foredoomed by its very intensity to a short, happy life followed by an afterlife of ghostly returns in popular culture. It was an art of excess, and as such it invited correctives and chastenings. But it would prove easier to try to reform the outlandish energies of the moderns than to equal their achievements. The historical masks that Pound and Eliot so carefully molded would be torn away with all the brutality that poets like Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath could bring to the confessional of their art. Personae and the impersonal theories that had breathed life into them seemed of little use to an angry young generation finding its voice in the intimately, savagely personal, in the mask of total sincerity. Yet something may have been lost in the exchange. The schemes of the modernists were overdrawn and their solutions sometimes foolish, but there is something winning in the quality of obsession that filled everything from their casual table talk to their choicest lyrics. These magnificos of the imagination (as Stevens might put it) really believed that art and culture, poetry and history, could be made to commingle in just and fruitful ways. Their capacity for illusion remains a challenge and a reproach to our era of routine subjectivity and diminished cultural hope.

At times, modernism *is* easy to dislike—all that posturing and fustian, the obligatory erudition and the Grecian formulas, the chasing after false ideological gods and the religious avoidance of plain speaking. The moderns' faith in the world-historical importance of their Arcadian piping can be trying. But there is a place for the genuine in their poetry: It is glimpsed in their disarming conviction that the new world could be rediscovered if only they persevered beyond the inauthenticities that American culture had held out to them in their youth. What Stevens called "a mind of winter" was a quality shared by so many writers of his generation, a willingness to strip away settled opinions and sedimented attitudes and to face

again the prospect of bare ruined choirs, to behold “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”³³ Sobered by the vision of nothingness to which their various modes of exile had exposed them, the moderns could descend into the soul’s winter and endure a season of keen asperities, then return to the bright world of their art and resume their fopperies.

³³ “The Snow Man,” in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 9–10.