

Some notes on Modernism

What Modernism was depends on which critical school of criticism one favors. Every version of modernism has its own heroes and heroines, and they all culminate in different versions of what is best about postmodernism now.

Some critics like Hugh Kenner would say it centers around Ezra Pound and all of his friends and contacts, especially in London and Paris (W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, H.D., James Joyce, Hemingway, and many others.) Such a vision of modernism would highlight its international flavor, its fondness for hybrid forms, radical innovations, and fragments, and its elitist views of the audiences for the arts. This version of modernism between the World Wars fits well with other international arts movements such as Surrealism, which was also influenced by the thought of Freud on dreams and their interpretations. This international modernism—quasi-American-British-European movement in arts and literature—is called High Modernism.

Other critics thinking more nationally would favor English poets like, e.g. Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin, who did not seem as interested in an international arts movement. Such a version of modernism would stress regional cultures, landscapes and languages—it was art that was not hard for most people in that culture to understand.

If one were to expand this Modernist canon to include Walt Whitman (especially the post-Civil War Whitman), and Gerard Manley Hopkins (“Wreck of the Deutschland”), then the distinctive feature would be how thinking and culture change as a result of war and its catastrophes. At the same time, social class issues have come into literary consciousness so forcefully that it is as though something irrevocable has changed what poetry can be and must be.

Whatever one decides about Modernism as a movement between World War I and World War II, everyone agrees that World War I was the central disaster of the epoch, and the arts had to reckon with it in sometimes extreme responses. There was great disillusion with the main structures of society and culture—God, King, and Country no longer seemed worth dying for as nationalisms were looked upon unfavorably.

Further, there were some outstanding figures whose influence is so great that no one can escape them whether one likes them or not.

T. S. Eliot

Eliot was hailed as the greatest poet of his generation by Edmund Wilson in United States and by F. R. Leavis in U.K. Leavis was extraordinarily influential in England as he taught a whole generation of professors about Eliot, especially *The Waste Land* as a new kind of poetry that could hold in the mind many types of voices and characters and scenes in a great dramatic tension.

Notably, the elevation of Eliot could not have happened without the advocacy and help and friendship of Ezra Pound. Pound had been struggling to modernize poetry and had befriended Yeats as part of his quest for a greater new poetics. But in Eliot he believed he had found someone who had modernized himself unaided.

Pound was also responsible for Imagism, an important development in poetry that stressed the image, which Pound defined as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." Pound defined the tenets of Imagist poetry as:

- I. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
- II. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- III. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

[from "A Brief Guide to Imagism" <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5658>]

Though Imagism as a movement was short lived, its impact has been tremendous as it launched the career of H. D., perhaps the greatest woman poet of her generation, and it also brought a more natural, spontaneous and sense-based language back to poetry.

1914 as a turning point for Pound and Modernism

Pound in 1914 discovered T. S. Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Joyce's *Dubliners*. In these works, Pound believed that he had found the fulfillment of what Yeats had also been trying to do. Pound felt that there were unrealized potentials in Yeats; he was dissatisfied with the way that Yeats' music always won out over "truth."

Pound had initially admired Yeats as the greatest poet in the language but became disillusioned and critiqued Yeats for lapsing into sentiment, falling back into post-Symbolism and late Romanticism. Eliot also critiqued Yeats for relying on spiritualism and the occult, e.g. summoning spirits etc.

Pound sought a live, vital speech, Man-to-man talk. He also adopted many personae in his work rather than speaking as his own autobiographical self. In this way, he sought mythological depths and resonances. He believed that the artist had an obligation to renovate art and "make it new!" Pound sought to break the forms and shapes of late Romanticism and Victorianism and to deal more directly with Reality. He wanted to get away from what he saw as the effete mysticism of the old Celtic Twilight, represented by Yeats. Pound believed in an apocalyptic progress of history. While Pound and Yeats were friends, Pound had hoped his elder would change and grow more lucid and less dependent on symbolism.

Yeats' reality emanated from his own will, i.e. his sense of will. Yeats was ultimately revolted by Realism and Positivism. There was little sense of other actual voices or people in his lyric poetry. On the other hand, even T. S. Eliot had to admit that there was great wisdom in Yeats' poetry even if one could never see where it came from.

Pound sought the otherness of reality for solace; Pound was more of a Realist and a believer in Progress—even in the evolution of arts movements.

On the other hand, Yeats thought Pound and Eliot were just naturalists, people at the mercy of greater forces than the will of the self, writers who are helpless before the contents of their own

minds. Meanwhile, Eliot complained that Yeats' wisdom was haphazard, irrational, and illogical. Yeats' mind worked 'independently of experience,' Eliot thought.

Does the mind merely record reality and experience, or does the mind create it? Yeats would say the latter. Yeats' had three doctrines that seemed to influence his poetry:

- (1) the borders of the mind are ever shifting but may reveal a greater One mind.
- (2) the borders of memory are all part of One greater memory.
- (3) these (above) can be evoked by symbols.

Yeats practiced astrology, believed in reincarnation and reverie trance states where the mind went to sacred places. His belief in Symbolism was based on a belief the contiguity of all lives, a collective unconscious of Jungian archetypes. Symbols lived in a life greater than any one person's life.

[Symbols in their purest sense are from nature e.g. the sun, the moon, the ocean, night, vs. emblems which are from literature or which are man-made.]

Much of Yeats' greatest poetry is "dramatic" in the sense that there is a powerful conflict being worked out at an archetypal or symbolic level. He sought self-transformation through his art; he wanted to be an other greater than the self. See "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium."

(Byzantium is set up as an ideal in history where art, culture, religion and society existed in an ideal unity— a sort of a utopia for art.)

In his own ways, Yeats was very interested in modern themes, including apocalyptic visions as in e.g. "The Second Coming," which has a "modern" theme but very traditional syntax and structure. In this poem, Yeats imagines himself in dreadful awe of a reversion to the pagan as though Christianity had ever really been the dominant cultural force in Ireland, i.e. in this very ironic vision he calls into question whether or not Christianity had ever really taken hold in the first place.

"Easter 1916" refers to the real heroics of everyday, ordinary people in a political struggle for independence; he hails the people who are swept up in and altered by history into something greater than themselves.

"Leda and the Swan" has a violent "modern" theme of what most readers today would consider rape or transgression, but it is set up as an iambic pentameter sonnet. Yeats' own view of this poem was that it was a pagan analogue to the Annunciation in Christian mythology.

In the end, Yeats always worked within very formal structures though they contained a greater and greater disparity of elements. Nonetheless, Yeats remains a great "modernist" because he never stopped being fully engaged with history even though he disdained much of what we call common humanity. He retained the poet position as a "higher calling" even though that meant he turned his back on most ordinary people.

Ezra Pound's idea of History was more linear and progressive (vs. Yeats' idea of history as cyclical) as if humanity were heading quickly toward an actual paradise on earth. He also disdained

the common man (embodied by Whitman) and sought to create an elite art for an ideally educated audience. Despite his politics, Pound's version of "Modernism," an international transformation across the arts from worn out forms to what "the age demanded" has endured.

Eliot and Joyce, unlike Pound, saw History as more cyclical. Their world and our world are just variations on another ancient world that future civilizations will probably frown over.

Eliot's greatest achievement in poetry was *The Waste Land*, which is a Wagnerian poem that has great music in spite of its almost incomprehensibly complex literary allusions. The impact of this long poem was so great due to the way it seemed to capture the spirit of the postwar era and make it into a myth. In later years, Eliot admitted for him it was inspired largely by a very personal grouse against life, but the great gift of the poem was that he showed how very personal, mysterious emotions of betrayal and emasculation could be transformed into a commentary upon an entire civilization.

[See also "A Brief Guide to Modernism" at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5664>]