

Introduction

Agency, Modernity, and Modernism

A recurrent image in T. S. Eliot's early poetry can be used as an emblem of the place of poetry in modernity. The titular character of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is stricken by indecision, doubts whether he dare "Disturb the universe," and is concerned what others might say. In contrast to this constrained world, he imagines a different identity and a different sort of space:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.
(Rainey 115)

The sea floor is not compartmentalized by the walls, rooms, streets, and stairs that characterize the poem, and, silent, is apparently unpopulated by those who might constrain the protagonist. But "claws" is revealing, and takes us back to the everyday world of the poem: Prufrock does not say that he should have been a crab, a lobster, or any other crustacean. He imagines himself as a disembodied pair of hands. The image is consistent with his erotic fascination with the women's arms ("downed with light brown hair!"). Looking more widely across Eliot's early poetry, we see that the image echoes others of hands and arms disconnected from their owners: in "Preludes," "the hands / That are raising dingy shades / In a thousand furnished rooms"; in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," "the hand of a child, automatic" that "slipped out and pocketed a toy"; and in *The Waste Land*, the hand of the typist, she who "smoothes her hair with automatic hand." These hands achieve something, but they seem to do so independently of their owners. In "La Figlia che piange," Eliot rewrites

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Laforge's line "Simple et sans foi comme un bonjour" ("Simple and as faithlessly as a 'good day'") to read "Simple and faithless as a smile and a shake of the hand." Nor are hands in Eliot always strong: in "Gerontion," the personified figure of History "Gives too soon / Into weak hands," while in "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," Princess Volupine extends a hand that is "meagre," "blue-nailed," and "phthisic."

Why might the hand, channel for the writer's expression, have become so detached from the mind and the body? Of course the profusion of autonomous hands in Eliot's poetry is partly a consequence of his employing techniques of metonymy, of substituting a part for the whole; but as the hand is the writer's instrument, I would like to suggest that these hands emblemize two important aspects of modern poetry. One is the impersonality of modernist writing: the writer remains detached from his or her creation. As James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus puts it, using another memorable image of hands, "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."¹ Joyce's artist keeps control of his hands, but we might take Eliot's independent hands as signs of a creative faculty that is detached from the rest of the human subject.

The other aspect is to do with agency: while in some cases the subject appears to have delegated its work to disembodied hands, in others the hands have escaped altogether. The "automatic" and the weak hands are particularly interesting in this regard, and emblemize the idea that the writer, in common with all individuals in the modern world, has suffered a loss of agency. Individuals either fail to achieve anything at all, because they are too weak, or they achieve something unintended, because something comes between the mind and the hand. Eliot's lines in "The Hollow Men" put it more abstractly and more starkly: "Between the conception / And the creation / Between the emotion / And the response / Falls the Shadow." It is curious to note Eliot's initial experience of writing book reviews using a typewriter: "I find that I am sloughing off all my long sentences which I used to dote upon. Short, staccato, like modern French prose. The typewriter makes for lucidity, but I am not sure that it encourages subtlety."² Eliot's hands not only have a mind of their own, but in conjunction with the typewriter they have evolved a prose style of their own.

Precisely why the individual should experience a loss of agency in the modern world is difficult to determine, and there are many conflicting

interpretations and differences of emphasis. It is not the purpose of the present chapter to adjudicate between them. In some accounts, the discovery of the unconscious forced the realization that the rational, conscious will is not in full control of the human subject. In others, the shadow that falls between conception and creation is language: the writer's consciousness that language never succeeds in fully expressing his or her inner vision leads to state of inhibition and, ultimately, silence. Language is an impersonal entity which writers inherit, created through generations of human activity. It is a rich inheritance, and yet words have always already been in other people's mouths. In some Marxist-influenced accounts, the inherited corporate life of language is merely one aspect of a world characterized by vast, impersonal social structures which the individual cannot control.³ In the humanist tradition "man" was the centre of the universe, and individuals believed that they could exercise a degree of control over their worlds; moreover, the significance of the non-human world was always determined in relation to man. In the era of imperialism and corporate capitalism, decisions are made by unidentifiable committees in charge of monopolies; or, in a more extreme case, circumstances change because of apparently non-human processes, such as changes in monetary exchange rates or the collapse of banking systems. In fiction, Joseph Conrad's novels provide some of the earliest portrayals of the dramatic irony that arises from globalized networks of power. Poetry, however, registered the displacement of agency less directly: it could indicate, for example, in the fracturing of syntax and diction, a human subject that was no longer coherent; by producing poems that resisted simple interpretations, it could force the reader to acknowledge that the world was no longer straightforwardly knowable.

The loss of importance of poetry in the modern world, and the consequent loss of agency for the poet, was also widely remarked. When in 1932 F. R. Leavis began *New Bearings in English Poetry* by saying "Poetry matters little to the modern world," the admission was somewhat shocking for a book of literary criticism, but it was not an altogether novel observation. Like the loss of human agency, the marginalization of poetry has attracted many different explanations. In some explanations, the growth of literacy in the late nineteenth century is the cause. Although mass literacy produced many more readers, they had little or no formal education in literature and literary tradition. They were drawn more strongly to forms of writing which could be appreciated in isolation than to those which required a literary background: to non-fictional writing, especially journalism, and to fiction.

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An alternative explanation is that poetry became marginalized not because of the growth of printed matter as such, but because of the growth of a culture industry which is centrally controlled. Poetry would be much more acceptable if it could provide an uncomplicated, readily consumable product, but unfortunately for it and for the culture industry, it too often requires its readers to participate in the making of meaning, if only because it requires them to read it out loud, and very often because it requires them to think. It is worth remembering that the typist in *The Waste Land*, having endured loveless love-making, and having smoothed her hair with her “automatic” hand, puts a record on the gramophone. The culture industry is dependent upon the mechanical reproduction of works of art: what would once have been a unique performance of a piece of music becomes, thanks to the music industry, endlessly repeatable. Poetry had long depended upon the mechanical reproduction of the printing press for its dissemination, but the printed page delivers only the words and not their meanings.

A final strand of explanation concerns instrumental rationality. Modernity, according to this argument, values activities only to the extent that they are means to practical, material ends; it has little time for pure speculation, blue skies research, or the subtleties of poetry. Quantitative knowledge is valued more highly than qualitative, because it deals with the practically orientated, measurable aspects of the physical world. Science is valued in so far as it promises technological or medical breakthroughs, but distrusted when it is simply a realm of abstract speculation. Culture, as a realm of unregulated play, is treated unsympathetically by instrumental reason, but the culture industry, as the manufacturer of culture products, has a definite material aim in mind, and is welcomed. From this point of view, the newly literate audiences marginalized poetry because to them language was a means to an end: utterances were valued according to their content, their “message,” not their beauty or their ugliness. From the point of view of instrumental rationality, cultural interpretation is welcome in so far as it can reduce a work of art to a definite message, because such a reduction produces something that might serve a practical purpose; the aspects of art that resist such reduction are distrusted.

There are many ways of defining modernism, and in consequence many ways of establishing what is and what is not modernist poetry. Critics in recent years have emphasized the plurality of modernism, and have grouped modernist writers according to family resemblances rather than a rigid checklist of criteria. The plurality of modernism is constrained by

reference to the experimental quality of the writing and to the experimentalism having a significant relation to modernity. It is not enough simply to experiment with grammar, structure, vocabulary, point of view, or any other element of poetry: the experimentation must serve some purpose in enabling the poet to engage with or cope with modernity. It is relatively easy to mimic the superficial appearance of modernist poetry, and many poets have been labelled as modernists on this basis. Conversely, it is possible to engage with modernity, or at least to depict and discuss it, using only traditional poetic techniques: Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain" (1912) is an interesting example. In poems of this sort, the reader hears about modernity, but does not experience it in the texture of the verse. Of course the questions of whether a given technique counts as experimental, and of whether it serves a serious purpose are always open to critical debate, so the formulation given above does not provide a mechanical method for deciding who belongs to the canon of modernist poets.

Ideas of Poetry

Modernist poetry sometimes challenges and sometimes flatly rejects received ideas about the aims of poetry and about the means by which it achieves those aims. Sometimes it continues traditional poetic tasks, but does so using such innovative techniques that the continuity is not immediately obvious.

The idea of poetry as *expression* is the most deeply engrained, because of the dominance of the lyric form; "expression" in this case usually means the expression of personal emotion, though in some cases emotion is mingled with the expression of ideas. It is an idea of poetry economically summarized by William Wordsworth's early nineteenth-century definition of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." The idea of poetry as *depiction* places the emphasis elsewhere: on "he," "she," or "it" rather than on "I." In practice, lyrical poetry in English has very often moved between depiction and expression. In what has become known as the "empirical lyric," the poet begins with personal observations of the external world before modulating into a more expressive voice; the expressive voice sometimes also modulates from personal observation and expression into first-person plural observations that supposedly include all of humanity.⁴ Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1850) is a widely

anthologized Victorian example, while Philip Larkin's "Church Going" (written 1954) and "The Whitsun Weddings" (written 1958) continued the form into the mid twentieth century. Though it has become the critical practice to write of the "speaker" in expressive and descriptive lyrics, the assumption in the early twentieth century was that the speaker could be identified with the poet. Such poems are vulnerable to the criticism that they are valuable not because of the poem in itself, but because of something external to and prior to it: the emotion which the poem expresses, the message it conveys, or the scene it depicts. In opposition to this tradition many modernist poets – most influentially T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) – insisted that poetry should be impersonal. Poetry, wrote Eliot, refuting Wordsworth's definitions, "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Raine 156).

The idea of poetry as the *evocation of mood* was at its peak in the late nineteenth century, and exerted a significant influence over modernist poetry.⁵ It shares some qualities with the ideas of poetry as expression and depiction, but a mood is subtly different from an emotion: we feel emotions, but we sense a mood; moods have an existence independent of the self. Moods are also more readily understood as something shared; though the idea of collective emotion is not illegitimate, emotion is more readily understood as an individual possession, mood as a collective one. Moreover, a mood can be a quality of a place, and a sensitive individual can feel the mood of a place in ways that break down the boundaries between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. To this extent, the poetry of mood shares something with the poetry of depiction, but the difficulty of capturing mood in exact verbal formulae makes "evocation" the more appropriate term. The poetry of mood had its roots in Victorian romanticism, and in the poetry of the French symbolists and their English-language followers: Tennyson's lyrics such as "Mariana" (1830) provide early examples; W. B. Yeats's early poems are the fully developed *fin de siècle* version. It often includes narrative elements, but the narrative stops short of defined narrative closure; in this respect it resembles the modernist short story. To a reader who expects a narrative form that brings the story to an end, or a narrative voice that will explain the significance of the events, the poetry of mood can appear unsatisfactory and incomplete.

One of the attractions of the poetry of mood was the respect in which the vagueness and unreliability of evocation removed poetry from the demands of instrumental reason. Writing in 1895 Yeats was quite explicit about this:

Literature differs from explanatory and scientific writing in being wrought about a mood, or a community of moods, as the body is wrought about an invisible soul; and if it uses argument, theory, erudition, observation, and seems to grow hot in assertion or denial, it does so merely to make us partakers at the banquet of the moods.

While poetry might adopt the discourse of instrumental reason, it subverted its instrumentality, making it answer to an ideal of evocation which would have been quite useless to science, technology, or business. For the modernist poet, the dangers of the late nineteenth-century poetry of mood were that it had evolved its own clichéd poetic diction, and that it too readily lapsed into imprecision for its own sake.

To define poetry in linguistic terms, as a distinctive way of using language, or as a distinctive poetic vocabulary, raises issues which were significant for modernist poets. Such definitions are important, because if poems are supposed to have an existence independent of their makers, we cannot define the distinctiveness of poetry by reference to the personal or intellectual qualities of the poet, such as his sensitivity or reflectiveness. It might seem straightforward to define poetry by its differences from “normal” language, whether by normal language we mean the language of everyday speech, the language of descriptive prose, or the literary language of fiction. Poetry might be defined as making more frequent use of figurative language (simile and metaphor), as using words with a fuller awareness of their etymologies, or as using combinations of words deemed unidiomatic in every speech. However, such an approach is problematic. No matter what definition is adopted, if one begins by defining another kind of language use as normal, one implicitly defines poetry as a deviation from it. While the deviation might be valued for being more exulted, more penetrating, or more durable, it nevertheless is marked as abnormal, as “deviant” in the pejorative sense of the word. Such a situation raises the question of why, if poetry is so much more powerful than normal language, poetry has not become the norm. Poetry’s very willingness to deviate from the norm marks it as suspect. As we shall see in chapter 9, a similar logic attends to the relation of figurative language to literal language. Figurative language might seem to be more expressive, more ingenious, or more subtle than literal language, but because it seems to be a deviation from the norm, it also appears to be merely decorative and therefore superfluous. In a world governed by practical considerations, the whole of culture can sometimes appear to be superfluous; it is tolerated as an ornament, but not seen as fundamentally necessary to human life.

In the light of such concerns, it is also important to entertain the idea that poetry is a form of knowledge. To make such a claim is to challenge the perception that poetry is merely a pastime or a form of entertainment, and to assert instead that it deserves to be taken as seriously as science, philosophy, or economics. To make this suggestion is not to claim that poetry can ever know the same things as other disciplines, or that it can know things in the same way as them; indeed, an important part of the claim is that poetry complements other forms of knowledge by knowing different things and knowing them in different ways. Moreover, to say that a poem knows something is different from saying that its author knew something. The knowledge possessed by a person is transformed by existing in the context of a poem. Dramatic irony, such as we find in a dramatic monologue, provides an analogous instance: what the speaking character knows is less than what the poem knows, because the poem more fully comprehends the situation. Moreover, the poem, being a poem, recognizes the linguistic nature of the utterance. In a similar manner, a lyric poem might know more than its author, because, once the author's feelings or ideas have found their way into the poem, they are placed in relation to a vast constellation of other poems. It might be objected that the personification of the poem as the possessor of knowledge is fanciful and illegitimate: poems no more "know" things than they pay taxes. The personification, however, provides a convenient shorthand for a kind of knowledge which exists potentially within the poem, and which is brought to realization by the act of interpretation.

Modernist Poetry

As T. S. Eliot's idea of impersonality suggests, modernist poets were sometimes critical of the dominant ideas of poetry. It is convenient to gauge modernist attitudes by reference to the imagist movement in poetry. Although the most important poems of the modernist canon postdate imagism, some of them incorporated assumptions derived from it. Moreover, the concision of Pound's critical writings on the subject, and of key imagist works such as Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (1913), mean that they provide convenient reference points for discussions.

The idea of poetry as expression – and particularly the idea of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow" of feeling – is challenged in several respects in Pound's "Imagisme" (1912) and "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" (1912).

First, Pound's focus on the learning of the poet's craft crushes the idea that anyone might be able to write a poem with reference only to his or her feelings. The poet must know the basic techniques of poetry, and should be aware of the finest models. Like the scientist, he or she should know what has been done before. The imagist practice of rewriting a poet's verse, "using about ten words to his fifty," indicated that the raw material of poetry was not feeling, but language. Second, the explicit definition of the "image" avoids the language of expression: an image "presents an intellectual and emotional complex." It does not express it, and it does not present a "feeling" or an emotion, but the more elusive "complex." Whatever a complex is, by the time it presents itself as raw material it is not inside the poet. T. S. Eliot's later analogy, in which the raw materials of the poet are like chemicals in a test-tube, also embodies this sense of detachment (Rainey 154). It should also be noted that by defining the materials of poetry as an "intellectual and emotional complex," Pound was distancing the movement from the late nineteenth-century idea of poetry as evocation: a mood is not usually understood as containing an intellectual element.

While the willingness of Pound to compare the poet to the scientist suggests a reduced hostility between poetry and science, it should not be taken to imply that Pound equated poetic knowledge with scientific. It is clear that he felt poetry offered something distinctive from other art forms and, by implication, other forms of knowledge. His warning that the poet should not "retell" in verse what had already been said in prose suggests he wishes to distinguish the capabilities of each form. Similarly in his warnings to the poet not to be "viewy" – i.e., opinionated – and not to engage in landscape painting, he seeks to define poetry's special strengths. For Pound, these strengths lay in its rhythmic qualities and, more generally speaking, its musicality, though the pursuit of mere musicality without rational sense risked confusing poetry with music.

As Eliot's reference to Wordsworth in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) suggests, the outlook of the romantic poets was significant for their modernist successors. Although I will also refer to Victorian poetry, particularly when discussing the dramatic monologue in chapter 15, for the majority of modernists Victorian poetry did not exist as a distinct category, being seen instead as a continuation of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century work of the Romantics. While the majority of modernist references to Romanticism are critical in tone, their criticisms are informed by an awareness that the Romantics had similarly ambitious

expectations for the public functions of poetry. The modernists' criticisms were several. First, as indicated earlier, many modernists were sceptical about the idea of poetry as the expression of personal feeling, and they associated this view most strongly with the romantics. Second – a point we shall consider in more depth in the chapter on lyric – many modernists questioned the centrality of nature to the Romantics' worldview. For the Romantics, nature was the source of all value, in contrast to a civilization believed to be corrupt and corrupting. By the later nineteenth century, especially among minor poets, this outlook had led to the expectation that rural scenes were the proper subject matter of poetry, and that the city should be represented only as a means of highlighting the value of nature. Romantic representations were infused with a subtle anthropocentricity: nature, whether terrifying, elevating, consoling, or invigorating, existed only in relation to human feelings, values, and expectations. Many modernist poets rediscovered the city as valid subject matter, and those who made reference to nature were aware of the shortcomings of the romantic outlook. (That is not to say that they succeeded in freeing nature from anthropocentricity: in many respects, human needs and desires are built deeply into human language.) Third, many modernists, particularly the politically conservative modernists, felt that the Romantic worldview was too optimistic about human nature. The position was expressed most trenchantly by T. E. Hulme in "Romanticism and Classicism," a lecture dating from around 1912, which became more influential with the posthumous publication of Hulme's works in 1924. Hulme blamed the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau for promoting the view that man "was by nature good" and that "it was only bad laws and customs that had suppressed him. Remove all these and the infinite possibilities of man would have a chance."⁶ This view manifested itself in Romantic poetry in the idea of the infinite, and in images of flight. Hulme argued instead that man "is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him." What Hulme called "classical" poetry was marked by "a holding back, a reservation," the classical poet was always aware of man's limitations. For the modernists who adopted Hulme's position, the reservation often manifested itself as irony; any glimpse of the miraculous or the infinite is severely circumscribed by the earthly and the everyday. Expressions of feeling are marked by the awareness that someone else might take a different view; the worship of nature is prevented by the awareness that nature is indifferent to man.

Though they criticized the Romantics, modernist poets shared many assumptions with them about poetry and its place in society. Above all, they shared a belief in the importance of poetry. Though modernists criticized Percy Bysshe Shelley more than any other Romantic poet, his claim in “A Defence of Poetry” (1821) that poets “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” sets the scale of ambition for modernist poetry. While the Romantics have often been seen as primarily private poets, the work of the major Romantics was informed by political awareness, and the modernists shared their sense of the importance of poetry in the public sphere. Yeats, Eliot, and Pound all engage with national and with European concerns, and although their poetic modes share little with the rhetoric or discourse of political prose, they are nevertheless political in a broad sense of the word. Many modernist poets also shared with the Romantics the belief that the poetic imagination was capable of creating new insights and new forms of knowledge. Although many modernists were careful to avoid using the key romantic term, “imagination,” they nevertheless believed that the poet possessed a faculty of mind which allowed him or her to make connections unavailable to other people. In “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921), for example, Eliot claims that the poet’s mind is “constantly amalgamating disparate experience,” while the ordinary man has experiences which are “chaotic, irregular, fragmentary.” The poet’s mind can unite experiences as diverse as falling in love, reading philosophy, and the noise of a typewriter, while for the ordinary man such experiences remain unconnected. Although many modernists subscribed to the idea that man was limited in his nature, the same limitations did not apply to poetry.

Reading and Language

Towards the conclusion of “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot turns to contemporary poetry and insists that “poets in our civilization [...] must be *difficult*.”⁷ His justification for such difficulty is that civilization has become complex, and produces “various and complex results” in the sensibility of the poet. Ordinary language is not adequate to express such “results,” and so the poet “must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” If we accept that modernist poetry is sometimes difficult, the consequence is that a fully engaged reading should not

pretend that the difficulty does not exist; and if any given difficulty is surmounted, the reader must try to remain aware of what the difficulty felt like, and must remain alert to the possibility that there may be other equally plausible “solutions” to the problem. To solve (or dissolve) a difficulty is to destroy it, and to destroy it may be to destroy the distinctive qualities of the poem. This is something that the minor poet Archibald MacLeish was aware of when he proclaimed that “A poem should not mean / But be,”⁸ and it is implicit in the New Critical idea of “The Heresy of Paraphrase.”⁹

Some of the difficulties we encounter when reading modernist poetry are common to all poetry. Many of our habits of reading and interpreting are based on our use of language in everyday practical situations, and on our familiarity with realist forms of narrative. In both situations, paraphrase is valuable. On completing a novel, we expect to be able to say what happened, and perhaps to be able to describe the main characters. The poems that are most readily adapted to this model are narrative poems and poems that can be treated as the containers of a “message.” Needless to say, such a reading is reductive. Ideally for this sort of reading, the poet summarizes the message at some point (usually the closing lines), and does our interpretation for us. Such expectations risk confusing poetry with morally improving sermons and with public rhetoric. Though they were rhetorically skilled, modernist poets were clear that rhetoric is not enough.

The present book aims to provide not readings of modernist poetry, but an account of the *processes* involved in reading it. In doing so, it implicitly draws on the work of Stanley Fish on the theory and practice of reader-response criticism. Unlike reader-response critics of narrative, who typically took major units of action as their units of analysis, Fish’s account of the reader’s expectations and their interaction with the text works at the level of the line and the word. Though Fish’s most persuasive accounts of reader-response analysis take seventeenth-century poetry and prose as their subject matter, their terms are readily transferable to modernist poetry. His approach to line endings, which I adopt in chapter 6, is to assume that we prematurely interpret when we reach a line ending, even though we often find, on turning the corner, that a fuller or even contradictory meaning becomes available. Fish argues that the final meaning should not prevail as the only meaning: the experience of reading a text consists of the sum total of all its temporarily available “meanings,” and the experience of modification and accumulation is what matters. Thus when

a poem summarizes itself epigrammatically in the closing lines, we should be careful not to privilege the perspective offered by the summary, but to remember our impressions before that moment of crystallization. The same principles apply to problems that we encounter while reading the poem. In “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” Fish identifies various moments in Milton’s poetry which have generated irresolvable conflicts of interpretation. Fish’s procedure is to argue that such problems “are not *meant* to be solved but to be experienced (they signify), and that consequently any procedure that attempts to determine which of a number of readings is correct will necessarily fail.”¹⁰ For Fish, a poem should not mean, but should be experienced; only then can “meaning” be pursued.

Elsewhere, this study assumes upon a broadly structuralist account of language, supplemented with more explicit reference to the works of Mikhail Bakhtin. Its structuralism is very straightforward: the elements of language signify differentially. This principle is most commonly illustrated with nouns: within the semantic field of cutlery, the sign “knife” denotes something which is not “fork” or “spoon.” Of course the same sign can exist simultaneously within several fields: within the field of murder weapons, “knife” signifies something other than “gun” or “phial of poison.” The same principle also applies to verbs: though “etherized” and “anaesthetized” are near synonyms, they have different histories and “etherized” might, in certain circumstances, carry different connotations. To think this way is necessarily to think historically: in 1848, one could speak of being “anaesthetized,” but the option of speaking of being “etherized” became available only in the 1860s. In reading a poem, we need to think about the linguistic choices that were historically available but were – consciously or unconsciously – rejected. One way of bringing such choices into focus is to mentally rewrite the poem and to ask what difference another word would have made.

As well as considering lexical choices (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs), we can also apply this approach to higher level elements of poetic language. For example, we can think of different poetic forms and metres as signifying, even before the particular words have been supplied. The significance of such choices varies historically. A metrically regular rhyming poem written in the era of unrhymed free verse signifies differently from one written before “free verse” became an option. A poem about country hedgerows signifies differently once the ideological underpinnings of such poetry have been criticized, or, more crudely, when such poetry has been labelled old-fashioned.

What further complicates the picture is that, for a poet and a readership blissfully unaware of free verse, a regular rhyming poem does not signify differently. Although structuralist linguistics often speaks of the linguistic system (termed *langue* by Ferdinand de Saussure), the linguistic system is never single or unified: different social groups speak subtly different versions of it; a single person belongs to several social groups simultaneously, and thereby has access to several different “dialects.” Although for much of this book, the focus is restricted to modernist poets and their readers, it is helpful to be reminded both of the internal variation within the apparently homogenous group, and of its contrasts with a larger literary field. In this respect, Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism are relevant throughout, and are the particular focus of chapter 8. Bakhtin moreover recognizes that utterances do not exist in isolation, but in response to other utterances and to concrete situations. Though poems are often treated as rising above such dialogue and as embodying timeless truths, it is illuminating to think of them as responses to other utterances.

Though modernist poets were uncertain of the power of poetry in the modern world, they were confident of their abilities to remake and renew poetry, and they remade poetry with a view to restoring its cultural prestige. They were aware, however, that although the poem must be able to survive as a creation independent of its maker’s hand, it could not survive without a readership who were willing to be active readers and active interpreters.

Notes

- 1 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 181.
- 2 T. S. Eliot, letter to Conrad Aiken dated August 21, 1916, *Letters of T. S. Eliot*, rev. edn., ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (London: Faber, 2009), vol. 1, 158.
- 3 See Gaylord LeRoy and Ursula Beitz, “The Marxist Approach to Modernism,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 3 (1973), 1159.
- 4 For “empirical lyric,” see Andrew Crozier, “Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empirical Lyricism,” *Society and Literature 1945–1970*, ed. Alan Sinfield (London: Methuen, 1983), 199–233.
- 5 Robert McNamara, “‘Prufrock’ and the Problem of Literary Narcissism,” *Contemporary Literature* 27 (1986), 359; for Yeats on the same topic, see “The Moods,” *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 195.

- 6 T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," *Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, ed. Karen Csengeri (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 61–2.
- 7 T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), 64–5.
- 8 Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica" (1926).
- 9 For "Heresy of Paraphrase," see Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), 176–96.
- 10 Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*," *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (Harlow: Longman, 1988), 312.

