

## EZRA POUND, HUGH SELWYN MAUBERLY AND AMERICAN MODERNISM

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*“...chewing-gum has improved living conditions all over the world by fifteen per cent, has given the rudiments of education and culture to thousands of workless and ignorant Aborigines, has created in the midst of the impenetrable jungle a series of model communities equipped with every outlet, orifice, comfort, and even luxury, which our twentieth century super-civilization can invent—pianolas, phonographs, radios, electric lights, automatic garbage-cans, telephones and telegraphs, sane dance-halls, hygienic soda-fountains, collapsible bungaloes, and stropless safety-razors.(...)Chewing-gum won the last war, and will win the next.”<sup>1</sup>*

The above quote by e. e. cummings touches upon some of the most salient aspects of an early American socio-cultural modernity; ‘super-civilization’ and its technology drives the mechanization of everyday objects, ticking and imbued with life. It encompasses the assumption of a progressive human trajectory, and the intense importance of chewing-gum, itself an excellent metaphor for insatiable but, imperatively, unfulfilling consumption. In this era, the world enters the private domestic living room as new forms of mass media are piped into individual homes and dance-halls. This is an America where the traditional work ethic of toil and strife, the importance of piety and obedience, and the economics of frugality are all cast aside in favour of the scientific, the phony, the progressive, the expendable and the fleeting. This is an American culture parading the evolutionary economic signs of late capitalism—the emphasis no longer on production, but on reproduction.<sup>2</sup>

However, this excerpt also shows us the other half of what can be called modern; this quote was perhaps delivered with cummings’ typical irony. This is the same irony that informs the paradoxical fission in the term ‘modern’; it refers to the flashy egg-shell surfaces of 1920s’ America, to Henry Ford and his manufacturing achievements, to the proliferation of advertising, and the triumphs of ever-advancing science, but it simultaneously refers to the rise of the feminism, socialism, communism, anarchism, Stein’s ‘lost generation’ and aristocratic self-exile, as well as a certain discontent with the concept of socio-economic modernity.

Today, critics agonise over a multitude of exclusive and complex definitions of Modernism. The modern, however, is perhaps best represented by this dichotomy between the notion of modernity, in terms of an historical stage in Western civilization, and Modernism, the aesthetic concept of the literary modern. The former encompasses pragmatism, an ideal of individual freedom within a humanist framework, an embrace of the cult of reason and the application, in socio-economic terms, of time as a calculable unit of monetary value. Modernism, rooted in Romanticism with radical anti-bourgeois attitudes, urging the will to ‘resuscitate’, refresh and make new, can be seen as a reaction to these circumstances of historical

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the speech made by e. e. cummings on the occasion of chewing-gum magnate William Adam-Wrigley’s 60th birthday dinner in 1922, hence the novel, if a little bizarre, obsession with chewing-gum! e. e. cummings, “William Adams-Wriggley: Genius and Christian” quoted in George J. Firmage, ed., *e.e. cummings: a miscellany* (New York: The Agrophile Press, 1958), 147.

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 4.

modernity, but not, for the most part, as a strictly *oppositional* reaction. More specifically, the work of authors such as W. C. Williams and Ezra Pound, along with many others, can be seen as projections of a *dissident* reaction. This point is crucial as Modernism does not seek to explain modernity, in an effort to negate its facets or decry its failings; rather it seeks to deliver a rendition of the chaotic image in the most aesthetically appropriate and self-consciously truthful way. Where oppositional expression seeks only to attack established mainstream culture or literature, Modernist dissident expression seeks to create, to illuminate and register the very nature of change in the prevailing literary or cultural trends.

In this context, Williams can be seen as the doctor who developed a curious rotating typewriter-desk within his surgery, enabling him to compose poetry between appointments, and as a poet who remained in America, exalting all things *real*, all things in which he saw tangible beauty. Pound, on the other hand, is something of an anthology Goliath in the field of American Modernism; he catapulted Imagism, Vorticism, H.D., T.S. Eliot and others into the world's poetic spotlight, while also writing prolifically himself. He led a precarious and unconventional, almost fictional (or fictionalised) life set in Europe, from where he dictated and dispatched novel literary trends back to America through his close involvement in various literary magazines.

With regard to both poets, we are presented with quite conflicting images of American Modernism in terms of style, material, locus and aesthetic objectives or poetic purpose, giving yet another image of the fragmented and fragile nature of the canon as a unitary body of work. Their indivisibility, however aesthetically tenuous, remains perceptible. Besides the more obvious details such as their common era, country of origin, their life-long friendship and biographical details, both critiqued the work of others, and were passionately interested in the advancement of art and literary aesthetics within the sphere of a modern America.

This dichotomy in style also runs throughout the characteristics of the American Modernist oeuvre, if we can even agree upon the existence of such an oeuvre, bearing in mind the immense diversity visible within this apparently singular canon of work. At base, this paradox is similar to the subject of quite a number of Modernist texts; the individual, meaning in one sense s/he who is a single person, a fragmented whole, but in another sense, the *in*-dividual, meaning s/he who is indivisible from some larger corpus. The emphasis here is upon the ineffectiveness of the signifier owing to the duplicitous ambiguity whereby the one term simultaneously expresses binary meanings. This is an example of the *sous rature* nature of Modernist writing, whereby the word or idea is chaotic and self-negating but no other concept or term can be supplied; the meaning cannot be clarified and the expression cannot be effectively resolved, hence its contradictory and paradoxical nature.<sup>3</sup> This is something that Williams explores in detail as he claims to address the imagination as the single artistic force of ultimate value:

To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force – the imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Williams claims that the imagination can and must supply the meaning of words when the ineffective

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<sup>3</sup> Jaques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 31-38.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Ellman et al., ed., *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003), 314.

reaches of language leave a gap between author and reader, between word and meaning. The aesthetic importance of the imagination is itself a Romanticist notion, whereby poems are enacted in the immediacy of the now and the momentary, like projections cast by a Wordsworthian ‘inward-eye’ of film-reel playing in the mind. However, in contrast to the Romantic quest to project oneself into a moment of imagination with the removal of empirical sense from poetic aesthetics, Modernism seeks to ground this moment in the concrete existence of the immediacy, in the urban, capitalist, warring world of the tangible and real. Williams stakes his poetics on this—the beauty of the real and the notion of ideas being solely in solid, tangible things.

Pound can also be introduced at this point in relation to the chasms between literal meaning and the projection and perception of the artistic imagination. In his *CANTOS*, as translations of the Japanese Confucian Odes, he strove not simply to bring literal, cerebral meaning to poems but sought to create equivalence of meaning and worth in cultural terms in more a logopoetic sense.<sup>5</sup> Pound sought to transliterate this psycho-political argument of Confucianism in a thoroughly ‘modern’ sense, meaning across the expanse of time, cultural-knowledge boundaries and enormous linguistic barriers, associated with the modern sense of spatial and temporal distortion:

“the air without refuge of silence,  
the drift of lice, teething,  
and above it the mouthing of orators,  
the arse-belching of preachers.  
(...)

chewed cigar butts, without dignity, without tragedy  
...m Episcopus, waving a condom full of black-beetles,  
Monopolists, obstructors of knowledge.”<sup>6</sup>

These lines are culturally *modern* translations, referring to the tropes and objects of a *modern* America, but rooted in an ancient Japanese stateliness; the sentiment, however, is what remains unchanged. It is this, the act of making new, of regenerating.

This adaptation of style is similar in ways to the principles of another form of *avant-garde* Modernism, Imagism. The principles of Imagism dictate that there should be no unnecessary words, that the poem-image be constructed “in the sequence of the musical phrase” and there be a direct treatment of the idea.<sup>7</sup> Imagism is also undoubtedly identifiably linked with the works of French Symbolists such

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<sup>5</sup> My use of logopoetic implies a more perfect identification with the concept of Confucianism as a social philosophy, one which informs not only the order of state, but also a psychological orientation, such as the study of music informing the study of tone, informing the study of movement which in turn informs the study of government. See Feng Lan, *Ezra Pound and Confucianism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 3-14, 45-77.

<sup>6</sup> Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 131.

<sup>7</sup> Ira B. Nadel, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-34, 264-284.

as Verlaine and Baudelaire (although Pound refuted such an association)<sup>8</sup> through their promotion of *vers libre*, and their emphasis upon the importance of the image. The links between the Symbolists and Pound's Imagism lie in their theorisation of the image, instigating the rise of picture-language, something which formed the foundations for movements such as the Decadent, incorporating aesthetics out of which Pound himself first evolved as a poet.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the similarities between the poetics of the Confucian Odes and the foundations of Imagism, in terms of the momentary image in suspension and the immediacy of the issue at hand, there is a third, utterly modern possibility. In relation to Pound's engagement with the socio-cultural modernity of the early twentieth century, and Modernist aesthetics, the association between the rise of photography (as a scientific process and as an accepted artistic medium) and Imagism can easily be made; both Imagism and photography are crystallizations of a single moment, both produce self-standing representations of the artist's inspiration and both rely on an ocular appreciation of form, line and shape. Like Emerson's 'transparent eyeball,'<sup>10</sup> Pound seeks in Imagism to propel the idea of poet as visionary or prophet. These influences engage aspects of the temporally and spatially removed past, Confucian Odes, with the recent and removed past, French Symbolism, and with the absolute immediacy of the modern present, artistic-photography, in a truly Modernist fashion, denoting a temporal stream of artistic continuum.<sup>11</sup>

This notion of a singular continuum of time in American Modernism contains and proclaims a temporal simultaneity in the act of looking both backwards and forwards, such as the temporal multiplicity visible in Pound's *E.P. ODE POUR L'ELECTION DE SON SEPULCHRE*, where the authorial 'I' and sense of Aristotelian unity are also cast into doubt, precipitating an increasingly fragmented voice;

“For three years, out of key with his time,  
He strove to resuscitate the dead art  
Of Poetry; to maintain the “the sublime”  
In the old sense. Wrong from the start—

No, hardly, but seeing he had been born  
In a half savage country, out of date;”<sup>12</sup>

Time is paramount in this poem; its wastage, usage and application as well as 'time-keeping' in the musical or linguistic sense of rhythm, and in the historiographic sense of recording and thus preserving events and people. The first stanza also refers to the 'old sense' of the sublime, meaning either the reli-

<sup>8</sup> “Imagism is not Symbolism. The Symbolists dealt in “Association”, that is, in a sort of allusion, almost an allegory. They degraded the Symbol to the status of a word. They made it a form of metonymy”. See Scott Hamilton, *Ezra Pound and the Symbolist Inheritance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Hamilton, *Ezra Pound and the Symbolist Inheritance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 3-30.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Nature*, <http://www.emersoncentral.com/nature1.htm>, maintained by Jone Johnson Lewis, University of Utah, 2001, accessed 5 March 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Although not strictly relevant to the topic at hand, the poet-prophet in the single temporal continuum of Pound's Modernism can be traced through Romanticism and Decadent roots back to NeoPlatonist theory, with which Pound was familiar but held to have been inferior to the more inclusive Confucian philosophies. See Peter Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickenson Uni. Press, 2004), 19-34, 80-97.

<sup>12</sup> Pound, 98.

gious origins of the notion or the Romantic permutation thereof.<sup>13</sup> This again connects Pound to the works of his literary predecessors, literally steeping the text in ages of artistic expression and aesthetic reproduction. There is an insistence upon the principles of Pound's Modernism in relation to the concept of the original; Pound called for the 'making new' of American literature,<sup>14</sup> denoting not only innovation in terms of poetic form and structure, but also the act of making new as in furnishing and refurbishing American poetics to incorporate and reconstitute older literary traditions such as American Transcendentalism as well as ancient mythology, and the work of mediaeval authors like Dante and Castiglione;

"I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman  
 (...)  
 It was you who broke new wood,  
 Now is a time for carving"<sup>15</sup>

There is again the implication of time and its transcendence, but more importantly, the immediacy of Pound's moment; the time is now, he, America and the history of literature, and specifically American literature is ready for 'the new.'

Williams' modernity was unique in that he, as a man of conventional medical science, embraced to some extent the onslaught of technological development and, in his poetry, was attracted to the machinery of language, and the mechanics of beauty and truth in poetic expression. His development of the triadic line, whereby one long line steps into three lines on the page shows his attachment to rhythm as an ordered and respected aspect of poetics, as well being his hallmark literary rendition of American dialectal-cadence.

"       Anthony and Cleopatra  
   were right;  
 they have shown  
   the way. I love you  
   or I do not live  
 at all"<sup>16</sup>

Williams concerned himself with the American nationalism of his poetry and the extent to which an American cultural-linguistic gait, meaning the American dialect, socio-cultural norms, and cadences of speech, could be integrated into poetics and poetry. He sought to specialize, specify and clarify the details of modern life in its momentary, fresh and potentially beautiful state.

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<sup>13</sup> Specifically, the religious sublime as the notion of divinely inspired writing, divorced from the emotion of the author, capable of transporting to soul, illuminated in the works of Longinus dating to 200 c.e. The Romantic sublime is that which builds upon this theory claiming that the sublime is sourced to terror and human experience. See Mathew Schneider, *Sacred Ambivalence*, <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/anthropoetics/ap0101/schneid.htm>, and Charles Rzepka, *Romantic Passions* <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/passions/rzepka/rzp.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Nadel, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ellman, 1285.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

In relation to American modernity as a distinctive socio-economic stage, these poetic requirements can be seen as dissident reactions to the aforementioned alterations in American perceptions of temporality and spatiality, as the globe shrank, owing to advances in media-communications and transport. America had begun to dominate England, its almost oedipal progenitor, in an economic and political scope as well as with regard to artistic revolution. In this climate of change, Williams is concerned with the rapid fragmentation of American society, his work trying to “[express] the whole nation’s character, and especially its urban volatility: its multiracial and immigrant streams of speech and behaviour, its violence and exuberance, its ignorance of its own general and regional history.”<sup>17</sup> There seems to be a tripartite relationship between Whitman, Pound and Williams as they attempt to plot the course of authentic, original American poetry. For his part, Williams attempts to expand upon the mainstay of Realism by eulogizing the beauty of the real in everyday life. Realism, particularly in work by French Realists such as artists Edouard Manet and Gustave Coubert and authors Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal and even Émile Zola, concerned itself with the exaltation of the real, the normal and the everyday, proclaiming that art is essentially concrete, and can only consist in the representation of real and existing things. Williams took this Realist notion and combined it with the Romanticist concept of the imagination, but an imagination grounded in the Modernist immediate and tangible. He sought to elevate the ordinary to a higher pedestal by using the poetic eye to show the absolute beauty in fragments, or fragmented images, of the real:

“a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water”<sup>18</sup>

This, Williams’ most recognisable and anthologised poem, displays the hallmarks of such projections of pan-ocular beauty in the man-made objects or tools of everyday existence, both contrasting and in harmony with the beauty of nature. The reader’s attention is attracted by the simplicity of the language, the complexity of its form and the highly unusual cadence produced when read aloud: ‘wheel/barrow’ and ‘rain/water.’ These are like inverted kennings, typical of Old English phraseology such as *eorðscræf* or ‘earth-cave’, meaning an underground dwelling. In this instance the familiar is employed in a distorted manner to re-present or re-configure the formulaic. We are accustomed to these amalgamated words and so their splicing makes their individual component signifiers, the raw material of the language, new and strange on the tongue. The turn of rhetoric has the effect of upending our linguistic certainty while at the same time also allowing us to view the object, that being signified, in a new light, as an object of inherent and attributed beauty.

In *The Young Housewife*, there is also this kind of re-examination, this time of the apparently diurnal activity of a young woman. This poem forces the reader to examine mundane, ubiquitous acts set in another context. There is a much-cited sinister note to this poem as the comparison of the young woman to a leaf, and the subsequent crushing of leaves beneath the wheels of the narrator’s car, leaves the reader

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<sup>17</sup> Macha L. Rosenthal et al., eds., *Poetry in English: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 883.

<sup>18</sup> Ellman, 294.

feeling a little bewildered. The tension is neither resolved nor explained but simply stretched across the image of the poem and left suspended:

“...and I compare her  
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car  
rush with a crackling sound over  
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling”<sup>19</sup>

This poem also engages with aspects of American modernity that are perhaps a little taken for granted today. We are so accustomed to its existence that we barely remark upon the car in the poem. The advent and era of the car is paramount in American modernity; its inclusion into everyday life as a method of private mechanized transport, and as a status symbol, is highly linked to the early twentieth century and Ford’s assembly line. In the poem, we note that the car is like an appendage of the narrator, ‘noiseless,’ that it is the wheels that drive over the leaves, not the narrator that drives the car over the leaves. This could conversely denote that this machine, this extending human appendage is also a *subjective* thing, making it seem as if the human narrator is the attachable entity, the object, not the machine.

Beyond the rather oblique reference to Marxist alienation, there are threads of early feminism in this poem; the woman is sexualized, slinking about un-corseted in silk, tucking in hair and courting the trades-men, and defined by “the wooden walls of her husband’s house.”<sup>20</sup> It is sometimes asked whether she is depicted more like a fallen leaf or a ‘fallen woman.’<sup>21</sup> She is left de-mystified but mythologised, both metaphorically crushed and given a bowing nod of recognition.

Pound’s image of femininity is quite considerably poorer. Where Williams at least avoids portraying women as binary whore/angel paper-dolls, giving women a certain humanity and empathy, Pound’s women seem to reflect his personal and professional opinion of women as a harmless but sometimes charming and useful sub-species:<sup>22</sup>

“Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.  
You have been second always.”<sup>23</sup>

and

“The female

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry 1908-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 67.

<sup>22</sup> Nadel, 267.

<sup>23</sup> Pound, 34.

Is an element, the female  
 Is chaos  
 An octopus  
 A biological process"<sup>24</sup>

In Pound's work, women often appear to be simply empty receptacles, facilitators of his be-smocked exercises of "eating, drinking, [and] breeding."<sup>25</sup> In his attempts to emulate Whitman, he fails to realise and declare a balance of equality in the role of each gender. Instead, women are depicted as sexual vessels to be divided into binary groups of the soiled and the pure, the whore and the angel; they engage in the modern social contract but have no attributed social agency. Neither one actually possesses, but rather reflects intelligence. Ultimately with Pound, not only in relation to women, but in general, there is the lurking, loitering suspicion that he is something of a hoarder, a collector of people, oddities, moments and appealing things. Imagism in a way reflects this magpie-like quality of spying something shiny, magnifying it and then eternalising it in poetry.

Finally, in Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*, one finds again a curious emulsion of a poem steeped in the themes of an established literary tradition, but corrupted to serve the purpose of modernity. One cannot help but notice the association between the Metro, meaning the Parisian *Métropolitain* (train), and the word's etymological origins from the Greek, *Metera* meaning 'mother' and *polis* (town or city), so, 'mother-town'. This notion of the city as female—specifically maternal—dates back to the literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, and Ben Jonson and Thomas Killigrew's fluid, foetid and fecund London. The reconstitution of this tradition, while engaging with the modern, portrays the station as the male narrator's fixed location, and the train and the city as the female transitive fluidity and its under-ground/skin arteries. Again we are presented with a multiplicity of associations from a plethora of sources, authors, periods and artistic movements. The 'apparition of these faces in the crowd'<sup>26</sup> seems like Pound's visionary and prophetic image of the paradox inherent to Modernism; the degeneration of humanity as a result of the state of mechanized modernity and, at the same time, the beauty of nature and the human in such a context, much like Williams' 'beauty in things.'

In conclusion, in relation to the engagement of the American Modernist poet with the state of American modernity—both the aesthetically and the socio-economically modern—Williams and Pound are both pivotal in their respective roles within the canon. As representatives of American Modernism they expound clearly the Modernist incorporation of aspects of the ironic and the ambiguous, promoting a state of 'constant flickering' or a suspension of resolution, uncertainty and tension, offering not explanations or reassurances but contradictions and unsynthesised dialectics. In the work of each there appears to be a considerable chasm between their respective texts, lifestyles, locations, political leanings and artistic *raison d'être*, despite their having known each other from early adulthood. However, the emphasis here is on the *engagement* of each poet with *his* modern, thus denoting a pluralist modern experience, in the individual and indivisible sense, something that can be seen throughout the work of both.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 142.

<sup>25</sup> Ellman, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Pound, 53.

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