

*Chapter 1***Poetic Modernism and  
the Century's Wars**

Vincent Sherry

**I**

Writing from an internment camp at Pisa in 1945, where he was imprisoned for treason to the United States government, Ezra Pound turned his attention to another, better time. In the Cantos he composed during this moment his mind shifted insistently from the indignities the sixty-year-old was suffering at Pisa to the promises the young adult had cultivated in London – from the end of World War II, that is, to the period just before the start of World War I. This was the beginning, these the sap years of the movement for which he had been designated, at least by himself, as leader and agent provocateur. His recollection of artists gathering before that earlier war in the Wiener Café in the British Museum district (Canto LXXX), for example, locates a center of reference for the energy he shared with his companion talents; here, in effect, was the vortex and origin-point for the extraordinary force field that would become literary modernism in English. This group included those British and Irish and American writers Pound knew by first (and nick-) names – Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford and T. E. Hulme, William Butler Yeats and James Joyce. “[T]hese the companions,” goes the invocation in the ritual memory of his first Pisan Canto (LXXIV), which is now, however, a wholly elegiac commemoration:

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Lordly men are to earth o'ergiven  
 these the companions:  
 Fordie that wrote of giants  
 And William who dreamed of nobility  
 and Jim the comedian singing . . .  
 are to earth o'ergiven.

(Pound 1998: 452–3)

As Pound turns this opening line by repetition into a refrain and lament, does he concede the fading of the movement as well as the passing of the protagonists? Recognizing this fact but also resisting its truth, Pound inscribes the powerful counter-rhythm of this moment in his life as a poet – and in the history of literary modernism.

Writing from a London now besieged in the aerial campaign of World War II, in the fourth of his *Four Quartets* Eliot also gives himself over to retrospection on the earlier period. In the verse story of a night walk (drawing on his experience as a fire watcher), his character-in-voice encounters “a familiar compound ghost” – some imaginative amalgam of Yeats and Pound, a *compound* indeed. This personage reviews the principles of a recognizably modernist program, representing its literary sensibility in mottoes like this:

. . . our concern was speech, and speech impelled us  
 To purify the dialect of the tribe.

(Eliot 1991: 203–4)

Like Pound's, Eliot's memories are shadowed by feelings of mortality – as their generation ages, and “body and soul begin to fall asunder,” the attribution of “the gifts reserved for age” features the indignity of “the cold friction of expiring sense” – but this meditation on human mutability moves to apprehensions that cut closer to the literary quick – to the core of a particularly, identifiably modernist poetics:

Last season's fruit is eaten  
 And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.  
 For last year's words belong to last year's language  
 And next year's words await another voice . . .

(Eliot 1991: 204)

If, in the special emphasis of its suffix, *modernism* denotes not just a condition of chronological modernity but a self-consciousness about living in a specific time (“modern” derives from *hodie*, “today,” so that

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modernism, in a radical but rooted sense, means *today-ism*), Eliot is grounding the verbal consciousness of modernism in its proper time. Yet one must observe in the formulations he poses that, in the tripartite division that includes Past and Future on either side, the central, crucial phase of the Present has gone missing. There is no word for Now – no mean absence in the literary history of modernism, as recorded by its now most venerable representative.

Eliot elaborates this absence in the second of the *Four Quartets*, in “East Coker” (1939). Here, in the opening year of World War II, he frames the period defined by the two wars as the interval of significance in his career – the years which, for the literary historian, comprise the long moment of modernism. In this characterization, however, it is a period without speech:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—  
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*—  
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it.

(Eliot 1991: 188–9)

Dismissing the possibility of poems spoken out of their most immediate moment, settling for a poetics of retrospect and secondary intensity, Eliot is drafting a sort of ante-post-modernist program, for verse that is always already too late – one that decisively pre-empts the signal condition of a modernist verse. The somewhat stylized humility in this self-deprecation, however, may be assigned to the not-too-reliable pieties of Eliot's later, adopted identity as Anglo-Catholic. And the need to make the disclaimer may itself serve to claim the relevance and validity of the issue being addressed. It is in its radical timeliness that modernist poetry will have found its word, its rhythm, its written signature and living speech – or not.

Pound also attests to this condition of the timely, as the establishing category of power and value in the poetics that matter, in his retrospect from Pisa on the London he shared with Eliot and others. In the extraordinarily moving Canto LXXXI, he is interrogating the excesses that have led him to his current state. “Pull down thy vanity, / I say pull down,” goes this liturgy of self-recrimination, scorching in its intensities and apparently unforgiving in its reach: “Rathe to destroy, niggard in charity, / Pull down thy vanity, / I say pull down”

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(Pound 1998: 541). But when he directs his questions to the energies he spent in the defining and identifying work of modernism, that is, to the task of making new poetry and making poetry new, of reviving the literary legacy in a present condition and idiom, well, this is different. "But to have done instead of not doing," he gestures to open this alternative consideration, suggesting through the antithetical conjunction that there is some better dimension to the energy he is questioning. "To have gathered from the air a live tradition," he proposes specifically, where this image of tradition as a wavelength energy living in the electric air of the moment identifies the mission specific to a recognizably modernist literature. And so the last, forgiving judgment comes: "This is not vanity" (1998: 541–2).

"*To have done . . . to have gathered*": the past perfect tense of the infinitive moves the action represented into a completed present, in effect, an already accomplished past. Here is Pound's version of Eliot's disclaimer: his poetics owned the moment, at least *in illo tempore*, even if that time is now gone. His version is tenser with the resistance that underscores the point that this category of the timely actually matters. And the two poets would also concur in specifying the period of the timely as the years comprised by the two World Wars – explicitly defined as such by Eliot, effectively framed by Pound as he speaks from the end of World War II of a time from before World War I as the interval of a now completed work.

Seeing the two poetic careers from these two respective points helps to mark the historical moment of modernist poetry, and it also suggests that the experience of war, in defining the times, also provides the historical content and timely import of their verse. Perhaps the most vivid and impending lesson any sentient imagination could draw from the events of the twentieth century at its mid-point was that war was no longer a particular or limited and finite event but a general, continuous condition of existence – a presentiment to be extended over much of the second half of the century in the experience of Cold War. The novelties introduced by World War I include most notably perhaps an impression of endless conflict – in mass war, which is also total war, the aim of military action has not to do with specific strategic goals, say, the acquisition of territory by a professional or mercenary army, but rather the gradual, protracted, seemingly interminable task of wearing out the enemy's capacity to make war: all resources of military and cultural and economic capital must be exhausted. (Think of the final days of World War II in Europe, where Germany maintained resistance to the last city block of Berlin, or in

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the Pacific, where an already decimated Japan held on until the apocalyptic horror of atomic bombing was *repeated*, that is, until total destruction became redundant.) While a number of factors need to be considered in accounting for these conditions in twentieth-century warfare, the experiential truth of the circumstances is witnessed in the shorthand formulation of these poets. For Eliot, the historical experience of the twentieth century, which provides the timely content (yes, it does) of his own verse, is defined as the continuum of the two major wars of the century. For Pound, looking back from Pisa in 1945 to the foregathering of London modernism in the cenacle of the Wiener Café, the century shapes as the significant instant beginning just before “the world was given over to wars . . . in those days (pre-1914),” that is, just before “that first so enormous war” (1998: 526, 521).

One way of understanding the experience as an ongoing war is to see the two conflicts in terms of repeated themes. Indeed, the same set of values and attitudes reappears – as an ever more heavily embattled protagonist. This protagonist may be cast, in the character of a single word, as Liberalism – the ideology that dominated the previous century. Its master narrative of history offered a story that was plotted to the establishing value of Progress and paced to the cadence of rational gradualism. As a step-by-step process, where each phase is scaled in measurable advance from the last (*rationality* means first of all ratio, scale, measure), history was moving like a grand syllogism, as reasonably as a sequenced and progressive thought, to a conclusion that was always better, a conclusion that involved an ongoing improvement of human circumstance. Empirical reason designed the chief vehicle for this process as it worked in the sphere of material science, in technology. Here is the sensibility that would be discredited so heavily in the experience of war, and of history as war, in the twentieth century, when time arrives at its dystopic end. Scientific invention and technological application have now resulted in the armaments of the two World Wars, those engines of destruction whose intensity and range would be unimaginable before 1914, or again, in the series of shocks that constitute the new history, before 1945, when the instruments of genocide are revealed as the intimate expression of the colossal atrocity of atomic war. The rationality of *Liberalism*, where human reason *frees* the species increasingly through the measures of progressive thought, plays the part of an epic hero in a history that is no longer believable.

This process provides one framework for understanding the emotional range in Auden's elegy for Freud, who died at 80 in September

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1939. Freud appears here as a late nineteenth-century Liberal rationalist. He has applied his science to the work of freeing the spirits of perfectible humankind; he has led the creaturely person out of “the night” (this darkness is both a residue of the species’ biological past and the shadow of the moralist’s false understanding) into and through “the bright circle of his recognition” to a better legacy, this improved and enlarged capacity:

... he would have us remember most of all  
to be enthusiastic over the night,  
not only for the sense of wonder  
it alone has to offer, but also  
because it needs our love. With large sad eyes  
its delectable creatures look up and beg  
us dumbly to follow:  
they are exiles who long for the future  
that lies in our power, they too would rejoice  
if allowed to serve enlightenment like him . . .  
(Auden 1958: 169)

The “bright circle” of Freud’s “enlightenment” depicts the same framework of values and attitudes that is passing into history, into this particular moment of history, so that, in this historically informed elegy, Auden’s representation of Freud’s principles in the present tense adds to the expressive pathos: the sadness of one man’s passing is expanded, clarified, intensified as his death registers the failure of these ideals on a historical scale. And so, in the last stanza of the poem, the poet presents the prospect of a Europe fallen into the ruins of that high dream of millennial Reason:

One rational voice is dumb. Over his grave  
the household of Impulse mourns one dearly loved:  
sad is Eros, builder of cities,  
and weeping anarchic Aphrodite.  
(Auden 1958: 170)

The legacy of World War II appears in advance of the actual conflagration, since, in a real sense, what will be lost in the process of its conflicts has been undermined as a possibility already and beforehand in World War I. The future memory of a history that has already happened provides the imaginative tense of this finale.

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If the public convulsions of Liberalism in the twentieth century extend from 1914 to 1945, this lengthened moment may be synchronized as the interval of modernism, which achieves its signal intensity as the expression of the climax and climacteric of that failing intellectual and political institution. Not that modernism is pro- or anti-Liberal. Rather, the energy that we represent under this heading of "modernism" finds the timeliest crisis of its period as the defining experience of living in its surcharged present, and so represents the extended trials of Liberalism as its intensifying condition. Whereas World War II can be taken as a confirmation of the worst possibilities already augured by World War I, there is not a secondhand but at least a preconceived or anticipated feeling even to the apocalyptic horrors of this latter day. It is in the modernist poetry of World War I that the watershed event of the new age, the shock of the modern in the twentieth century, is felt with an original energy and represented with an equivalent intensity. This is also the historical moment – roughly, 1914–1922 – in which the body of literary work that would constitute the canon of modernist poetry was composed, at least in England. Certainly, for many poets writing in Britain and Ireland in the second half of the century, it is the verse coming out of the years just before and after that Great War of 1914–1918 that defines the effective legacy of poetic modernism. This bibliography remains the literature of modernist record, I suggest, because the original, large-scale crisis of the mainstream values of nineteenth-century Liberalism provides its establishing circumstance. To restore its original context and timely voice is to recover some of the historical content and imaginative depth of this legacy for the rest of the century, and this necessary work of historical excavation may be undertaken first.

## II

In August 1914, circumstances shaped the political situation in London as one of the liveliest sites in the global picture of this first World War. The governing party was racked at this moment by internal divisions. English Liberals had to maintain support for a war that, by precedent and convention, by partisan tradition and policy principle, they ought to have opposed. This contradiction, which undermined some of the major values of the Liberal party and so located a true watershed in the traditions of liberal modernity, provides the formative ground for the most important modernist verse of the occasion.

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The lines of opposition in the 1914 crisis may be drawn from the major division within the Liberal party on the question of war, in general. To one side, the memory of the great Victorian Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone preserved the ethic and method of moral rationalism. This liberal tradition of public reason maintained that armed force required an informed act of logical conscience, a choice reasoned freely and in public and in accord with the loftiest moral values (see Rawls 1996 for the best representation of this salient value and its comprehensive practice in Western political tradition: especially xxiv, xxvi–xxviii, xxx, 47–59, 212–27). To the other side, Liberal imperialists proceeded under the operative standards of *realpolitik*. In this way of thinking, the British military served as an instrument of security: its power could be parleyed through agreements with other European nations. These alliances might require involvement in hostilities, but these engagements might hardly be appealed to the codes of Gladstonian probity – the imperialists tended to negotiate English interests within a frame of global reference that put practical or local advantage and commercial concerns first (see Hobhouse 1910: 104, 221). Since 1906, the most powerful positions within the majority government were held by Liberal imperialists – Prime Minister H. H. Asquith and his Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey – but the logic of foreign policy was still controlled in its public discussions by Gladstonian protocols. In this situation, Asquith and Grey needed to keep private their alliance building with France and Russia. Officially, they continued to deny the existence of these “secret agreements” (so dubbed by an already suspicious public), at least until early August 1914, when the network of European connections was activated (Morel 1916: 35–41, 273–300). At this moment, as Britain paused before the awful prospect of a Continental war, these rival traditions within Liberalism were evidenced in tensions that anticipated, in substantial detail, the major crisis this developing event would present to partisan – and national – life.

The Foreign Secretary’s speech before Parliament on August 3 provided the loftiest expression of the Liberal rationale for war, arguing the moral cause of a righteous defense of France in view of the imminent German incursion into neutral Belgium (Grey 1914b). But other pressures – the commitments hidden in the “secret agreements” – were also coming to bear on the Liberal government. The tension between these rival frames of partisan reference is reflected in the editorial reports on Grey’s address in the two leading Liberal dailies on August 4.



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The *Manchester Guardian* holds true to the standard of reason at liberty, which, in this instance, the writer depicts as a compromised principle. This report protests that citizens and Parliament have not been given information sufficient to “form a reasoned judgment on the current of our policy.” In Grey’s conclusion that Britain must go to France’s aid, even when Germany has vowed not to move on any undefended areas, the writer accurately intuits that the Secretary is being compelled by forces that exceed those of the moral rationale he has claimed. “His reasons are extraordinary,” the editorial demurs. “Is it rational? Can it be deduced, we will not say from the terms of the Entente, but from the account of secret conversations which was given yesterday? Can it be reconciled with any reasonable view of British policy? It cannot” (*Manchester Guardian* 1914: 6).

The especially strenuous effort of “reconcil[ing]” these eventualities with a “reasonable view of British policy” may be evidenced in the language of the news leader in the *Westminster Gazette*, which offers this narrative – and argumentative – paraphrase of Grey’s speech:

Sir Edward Grey passed to the consideration of the present position of the French fleet in the Mediterranean which *evidently* sprang out of the plans for co-operation. The French fleet was in the Mediterranean *because of the feeling of confidence* between the two countries. *Hence it followed* that if a foreign fleet came down the channel we could not stand aside and see it attack the defenceless coast of France. *The House was brought to the conclusion* that we had a definite obligation to defend the coast of France from attack, and, generally speaking, it showed that it was prepared to support the government in taking action. France was *therefore* entitled to know and know at once that she could depend on British support. (Grey 1914a: 10 [emphasis added])

Tellingly, this report of “The House and Sir Edward Grey’s statement” bears the subtitle: “Logic of events.” Complying entirely with Grey’s own rationalistic stratagems, the report pays special attention to insert those conjunctions that establish cause and reasoned transition in the argument. This language of analytical and ethical reasoning, however, is obviously imposed on a resistant circumstance. The second-thought, secondhand, overlaid nature of this rhetoric of ethical reasoning is the one conclusion that may be safely drawn from this passage.

“Reason in all things” is a poetics, ethically addressed but aesthetically prepared, and the fact that it springs into service already and immediately reveals its established, well-endowed power. But if Anglo-American modernists write their English, as Hugh Kenner has

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quipped, like a foreign language, handling it with the care of relative aliens, the outsider status that Pound and Eliot share in wartime London helps to account for their ability to reiterate the Liberal idiom, with a difference. It is the difference that takes the measure of that profound contradiction in the language of high partisan culture, which, all in all, witnesses the discrediting of the great tradition of moral rationalism within Liberalism. This dissonance provides as it were the tuning fork for the major modernist poetry of the moment.

### III

Pound conducted a review of literary and political journalism in wartime Britain in "Studies in Contemporary Mentality," a twenty-part series published through 1917 in the *New Age*. An indomitable "reasonableness" appears as the dominant quality in this verbal culture but, in its service to the current war effort, this quality is under heavy stress. Pound pronounces this consolidating insight when he defines British political idiom through the exemplary standard of the leading literary weekly, the *New Statesman*:

I knew that if I searched long enough I should come upon some clue to this mystery. *The magnetism of this stupendous vacuity! The sweet reasonableness, the measured tone, the really utter undeniability of so much that one might read in this paper! . . .*

. . . The "New Statesman" is a prime exemplar of the species, leading the sheltered life behind a phalanx of immobile ideas; leading the sheltered thought behind a phalanx of immobile phrases. This sort of thing cannot fail. Such a mass of printed statements in every issue to which no "normal, right-minded" man could possibly take exception! (Pound 1917: 407 [emphasis added])

A "reasonableness" that consists of "measured tone" only, and so coalesces into the merest feeling of rationality; a logic as hollow as it is polished in presentation, well-managed indeed in all its impressive "vacuity," its "stupendous" emptiness: these are the sounds of contemporary Liberalism at war, a linkage Pound clinches with the metaphors of mobilization and images of military formation. This sensibility stands exposed at the extremity of his ridicule in its vapid sagacity and absurd sententiousness. "That is really all there is to it," he summarizes, but tauntingly: "One might really learn to do it oneself" (1917: 407).

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How might Pound do it himself? How to parley the rational inanities of official war discourse into new words, in verse? Pound's boast locates the main project and major dare of his emergent enterprise. But his mimic initiative proves a good deal more difficult – and so, potentially, more significant – than his vaunt might concede. The extent and strength of the majority power's ownership of the common language may be witnessed by the fact that to engage it substantially Pound had first to travel far outside the home domain, to imperial Rome, where the task of rendering ancient Latin poetry opens up the possibility of an alternate voice within his own literary English. This opportunity locates the motive for the otherwise idiosyncratic labor of *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919), the (highly) creative translation Pound undertook as his main poetic endeavor through the second half of the war (see 1971: 90; also Carpenter 1988: 324).

This Roman poet was chosen also for reasons beyond Pound's imaginative interests in linguistic difference. In his *Elegiae*, Propertius presents himself as a poet desiring to write of love when conventional expectation pressures him to proclaim a martial-minded verse. A poet of this moment is supposed to celebrate the imperial aims and military campaigns of the Augustan dynasty. His crafty engagement with those rules shows his persona making his evident requests for permission to sing about "Cynthia" but addressing instead, more interestingly and slyly, quietly and indeed devastatingly, the attitudes and practices of an imperial poetics (see Sullivan 1964: 58–64, 75–6). The mock-heroic diction of his *Elegiae*, his parodic Virgilisms, the hollow triumphalism and empty finishes of those all too heavily labored martial cadences, which turn Augustan verse convention into august inanities: Propertius provides Pound a model for echoing the times against the times. This is a pattern the modern poet adapts to the syntax and vocabulary of his own political present.

The opening verse paragraph of Pound's poem recasts its Latin original in an extensive interpolation, which, in the guise of a poet's invocation of his Roman muse, acknowledges the deity reigning over the discourses of the current war:

Out-weariers of Apollo will, as we know, continue their Martian  
generalities,  
We have kept our erasers in order.

(Pound 1990: 205)

Liberal divinity, god of logic as well as music and poetry, Apollo has been suborned to the work of current verse, worn out not by

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generals but by the “generalities” of war, by political abstraction, by ideological argument. How, Propertius-like, might he play along with and pull against this existing linguistic condition?

The verbal art special to *Propertius* features an interplay between an archly rationalist syntax and a wittily impenetrable vocabulary. On one side, the persona of the classics translator demonstrates a declarative knowiness about the *materia poetica*, here the site of ancient history and myth. Moving easily through this range of reference, Pound’s speaker builds a progression of apparently factual statements as logical, common-sensible propositions of obvious knowledge. On the other side, however, Pound’s reader frequently experiences allusions to chronicle legend and literary fable that are fetched from the depths of Mediterranean antiquity and featured, it seems, for their very unfathomability. Consider, in this representative catalog, the interaction between the local knowiness of Pound’s persona and the distant incomprehensibility of these citations, which, one by one, and with the help of a classics manual, might be identified, but which, as substantial parts of a single imaginative narrative, challenge almost any reader’s grasp of what the story is, of what is actually going on here:

For Orpheus tamed the wild beasts—  
and held up the Threician river;  
And Cithaeron shook up the rocks by Thebes  
and danced them into a bulwark at his pleasure,  
And you, O Polyphemus? Did harsh Galatea almost  
Turn to your dripping horses, because of a tune, under Aetna?  
We must look into the matter.

(Pound 1990: 206)

Who, most of us must ask, was Galatea? And how close did she get when she *almost* turned to the horses of Polyphemus? That specifying adverb is Pound’s interpolation, whose blank space in the Latin original reveals the hollowness of his own (carefully) concocted knowledgeability (Ruthven 1969). There is a particularly *pseudological* quality to this tone, as indicated by another interpolated word, the first: “For.” This conjunction establishes the expectation of cause-and-effect sequence, the impression that some logical proposition is in process. It builds some presentiment of common-sense meanings, one that Pound complements with those reassuring words of common speech. He steadily undercuts this promise, however, by enforcing the awareness that we do not know these mythological personages very well, if at all. “We must,” the next interpolation goes, “look into the

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matter," but when we do we see through the easy loquacity, the familiarizing fiction of inserted words like these, and find reason-seemingness as the aim and intended effect.

Pound's new conceit echoes to the background sound of these times. It also opens in his own further work in a newly studious freedom of statement, a quasi-logical prosody, which helps him in the rhetorical work of negotiating an ever-burgeoning matter-of-documentary-fact in the *Cantos*. As a model of poetic innovation in the twentieth century, Pound's life-long project lives the initiatives of 1917 forward into the major literary history of the second half of the century. This longevity measures the pressure and intensity of those earlier working conditions. And these are the same conditions that are shared by his co-national and modernist accomplice.

**IV**

Eliot's arrival in London in early August 1914 (a fugitive of the European war, whose outbreak found him summering in Germany in anticipation of a year's study at Marburg) coincides with the beginning of an identifiably dry time in his poetic life. The heavy pressure being exerted on an imaginative language by the verbal culture of the political war may be taken to account in some part for this strained silence.<sup>1</sup> And it is revealing that the way out of this condition led through the same exercises Pound was conducting, concurrently, in his engagements with the other tongue of literary Latin. For Eliot, it is French.

Consider "Petit Epître," the first of the spring 1917 efforts:

Ce n'est pas pour qu'on se dégoûte  
Ou goût d'égout de mon Ego  
Qu'ai fait des vers de faits divers  
Qui sentent un peu trop la choucroute.  
Mais qu'est ce que j'ai fait, nom d'un nom,  
Pour faire ressortir les chacals?

(Eliot 1996: 86)

<sup>1</sup> Eliot's antipathy to the premises and methods of modern Liberalism, the majority power in literary and political London in 1914, may be thought of as one source of his shutting down poetically when he arrives in Britain in August 1914. His complex interaction with the cultural infrastructures of Liberalism, and the strongly negative attitude he expresses toward the premises of pan-European liberalism, are surveyed by Sherry (2003: especially 157, 162–3, 171, 351 n.13).

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Eliot encloses echoes of whole words within others – “gout” in “dégoute,” “d’égout,” – and reiterates similar phonetic formations across differing phrases – “fait des vers” in “faits divers” – to emphasize and consolidate the material sound of these words. He arranges the physical body of the language, however, inside a highly elaborate apparatus of syntactical ratiocination – that very French array of rhetorical negatives, antithetical conjunctions, subordinate and relative clauses. The discriminating thinking that this rationalistic syntax fosters in standard French, however, has turned into a sheer mouthful of Gallic bread and cheese. And the sauerkraut – “choucrouste” – to which Eliot’s speaker refers worriedly gestures toward the local prompt for this new conceit of reason-seeming nonsense in the civilian culture of the war, which proscribed this stereotypically German food and overwrote his own poetic response – until now. The freeing effect of writing in French does not represent escape but, like humor, works through a sort of transforming exaggeration, which amplifies the bizarre capacities that the language of the English political moment is demonstrating. Here a native sense has become a stranger indeed to its own verbal reason. Eliot’s poetic language reads as English, just in French.

This initiative extends into English literary idiom for Eliot in a poetic form for which his French interlude has also refreshed his attention: the quatrain stanza, modeled for him (as for Pound) by Théophile Gautier. In late spring 1917, Eliot composed at least five poems in this new measure (1988: 178). This rush of productivity displays the release of energies pent up for several years, but it also registers the stimulus of his discovering a shape most particularly cadenced to the instigations of the current political day. Within its tightly maintained structure of alternately rhyming lines, a regimen that translates into a stiffly disciplined metric, Eliot’s quatrain stanza develops a rationalistic syntax and semi-discursive vocabulary to convey an impression of well-regulated thought that dissolves constantly, however, into preposterousness. It is a rhythm that quickens to presentiments that have been forming in his verbal imagination over several years of this ongoing war.

The familiar instances of this literary wit include the rationalistic opacities of “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service.” Incorporating Pound’s revisions, the liturgy opens thus:

Polyphiloprogenitive  
The sapient sutlers of the Lord

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Drift across the window-panes.  
In the beginning was the Word.

In the beginning was the Word.  
Superfetation of τὸ ἔν,  
And at the mensual turn of time  
Produced enervate Origen.

(Eliot 1996: 377)

As Huck Finn remarked, in escaping a similar verbal service, "The statements was interesting, but tough" – and toughened here by the archly declarative, apparently reasonable syntax, which consorts and contrasts magnificently with the wholly fugitive sense of the Latin and Greek formations. This logically pompous nonsense carries the deeper meaning of the discourses it has raised into this heckling echo.

This historical origin may be recovered through the archaeology of one of Eliot's earliest efforts in the quatrain prosody. Not a very good poem at all, "Airs of Palestine, No. 2" offers nonetheless direct evidence of the incentive this new quatrain measure takes from current political lingo. It takes as its target and point of critical mimicry Sir John Spender, editor of the Liberal *Westminster Gazette*. "God from a Cloud to Spender spoke," the poem opens joco-seriously,

And breathed command: "Take thou this Rod,  
And smite therewith the living Rock";  
And Spender hearkened unto God. . . .

And such as have the skill to swim  
Attain at length the farther shore  
Cleansed and rejoiced in every limb,  
And hate the Germans more and more.

They are redeemed from heresies  
And all their frowardness forget;  
And scales are fallen from their eyes  
Thanks to the Westminster Gazette.

(Eliot 1996: 84–5)

Where scriptural references and religious diction mingle with the rhythm of a barracks-room ballad, the odd tonality serves at once to replicate and characterize the moral rationales for the war, that doggerel logic, which Spender's paper and its partisan likes have tirelessly offered. This tone also offers a rough-but-ready replica of the

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mock-sententiousness and pseudo-reasonableness that the later, more polished quatrains will smooth out.

The conceit of Eliot's quatrain art finds its signature piece in "Sweeney among the Nightingales," the poem whose dramatic location lies in a seedy London bistro of the war years. In keeping with the counter-rhythm of his new poetics, the stanzas work equally to invite and defy an impression of consistent significance, a promise at once centered and compromised in the figure of Sweeney himself.

The "zebra stripes along his jaw" reflect the creases cut into the fat of Sweeney's neck by the stiff collar of the dress uniform worn by military personnel in the Great War – Sweeney is the soldier, returned to London from the front. Just so, the poem opens onto another level of potential significance, which its imaginative apparatus makes every effort of rhetoric and gesture to claim. The majestic cadenza of the final quatrains –

The host with someone indistinct  
Converses at the door apart,  
The nightingales are singing near  
The convent of the Sacred Heart,

And sang within the bloody wood  
When Agamemnon cried aloud  
And let their liquid siftings fall  
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud  
(1996: 380–1)

– includes, in the reference to Agamemnon, a closural event Eliot has prepared in advance by the epigraph, which spells out (in Greek) the death-cry of the tragic protagonist in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. The heroic soldier returning from the Trojan War has been stabbed by his scheming wife Clytemnestra – a feminine menace Eliot also reflects in his poem in the threat these various "nightingales" (the word, in French, is slang for prostitutes) present to the male protagonist. Could Agamemnon really be the heroic prototype of Sweeney?<sup>2</sup> The modern soldier's "apeneck" might equip him with a gift for simian mimicry, but it hardly enables him to resemble the Hellenic hero credibly.

<sup>2</sup> The late addition of the Greek epigraph – it is not included in the penultimate draft of the poem – suggests that the heroic parallel comes to Eliot as a second thought, which he includes to complicate the hermeneutic of Sweeney; see the summary of the manuscript evidence by Ricks (Eliot 1996: 381).



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Why devise this parallel *manqué*? The meaning of Eliot's framing action may lie not in the content it organizes but in the gesture it represents – specifically, in the empty gesture it presents, where the epigraph and last stanza join to promise a formal logic that is not embodied in the poem's content, its central *mise-en-scène*. This absence is amplified through the rhythm particular to the quatrain, which appears driven, inexorably as ever, but by a premise as contradictory as Sweeney's claim to heroic fame. It is an imaginative rationale as blank as the logic of the policy that sent Sweeney and his likes to war to begin with.

The formal conclusion to hostilities, the "peace" treaty signed at Versailles in July 1919, provides the occasion – circumstantial as well as imagined – for Eliot's richest poetic deliberation on the war. "Gerontion" takes shape through July 1919, and the poem makes several references to these contemporary events (Eliot 1988: 312).

Eliot's speaker represents the substance of his monologue-disquisition in its conclusion as "small deliberations" – *small*, presumably, because *Gerontion* means, specifically, a *little* old man. Where he expands these "small deliberations," in his mind's eye, to "multiply variety / In a wilderness of mirrors" (Eliot 1996: 350–51), however, the poet is conveying a larger circumstance as the framing occasion of the poem's event. He is imaging the scene in which the "deliberations" of (supposedly) "great men" have recently taken place – in the Great Hall of Mirrors of the Trianon Palace at Versailles. If the "wilderness of *mirrors*" secures this allusion, an irony special to the history being inscribed at Versailles lies in that otherwise unlikely figure of "*wilderness*." This royal estate stood originally as a monument to Enlightenment *civilization* – its reflecting halls and formal gardens mapped a scheme of metered and reasoned degree to the rationalist plan of the universe. The emblematic edifice of this first Age of Reason is overshadowed now by the consummation of the second, in the rituals of savage, retributive justice just conducted at Versailles. Reason in All Things is the sensibility under whose signature the war will have been authorized and prosecuted in Eliot's England, too, and he puts this specifically English sensibility on the rhetorical line in the poem's character-in-voice.

Eliot's aged speaker belongs to the senescence of contemporary British Liberalism, a generation that has authored in words a war its old men have not fought in body. Making this admission in the opening lines, Gerontion complements it with an expressively mangled syntax and grammar:

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I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies, fought.

(Eliot 1996: 349)

The clausal construction projects the progressive discriminations of verbal reason – “neither / Nor / Nor” – as its stipulative spirit, its motivating action, but the ambitious plan of a thrice suspended period turns into the wreckage its phrasal sequence actually makes of it. Behind this verbal rite, so badly performed (but well rehearsed), echoes the wreckage of the policy logic Liberals like this authored to prosecute the war.

Eliot extends the sensibility of his speaking character to its revealing extreme in the central meditation on “History.” “Think now,” his speaker proposes to open this deliberation, and repeats the injunction several times, several ways:

Think now  
[History] gives when our attention is distracted,  
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
That the giving famishes the craving. . . .

Think  
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices  
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues  
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes . . .

Think at last  
We have not reached conclusion, when I  
Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last  
I have not made this show purposelessly . . .  
(Eliot 1996: 350)

Verging compulsively on some deliberated significance – “Think now,” “Think now,” “Think neither,” “Think at last,” “Think at last” – the speaker proceeds to a “conclusion,” however, which is “not reached.” The logic is promissory at best, really only hortative. Eliot seizes this conceit of meaning-seemingness as a poetics, as witnessed especially near the end of the main passage, where he turns the words of progressive and logical proposition into a composite of contradictions. How is it, after all, that an “unnatural vice” can be biologically “fathered,” and a vile unreal thing begotten from a natural good? Whose “impudent crimes” are capable of generating “virtues”? The speaker talks

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through these disparities with every pretence of reasonable and coherent meaning. The inverse ratio and particular power of this verse show in its capacity to outsize its own rationalist measures, reaching down through the sense it feigns to the illogic it really means, where the emotion that is released grows in ratio to its overwhelming of an older Reason. This complex effect is the meaning recent "History" has revealed to the critical imagination of the modernist, who, like Pound, distinguishes his art by the special faculty he manifests for tapping this awareness and providing the extraordinary moment of history the answering echo of a new imaginative language.

**Coda**

The poem most closely associated with the cultural experience of the modernist war is surely Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). The mood of exhaustion in this work is usually attributed to the conditions of post-war ennui, but this emotional affect may not in every respect derive from the actual lived experience that the poem represents. In fact, a number of lines and images in the poem antedate the Great War, reaching back to Eliot's years as a doctoral student at Harvard (an archaeology of the working drafts of the sequence, provisionally titled "He Do the Police in Different Voices," shows the considerable proportion of this earlier material and suggests that the completed work turns on several conceits of imaginative feeling that are at least a decade old). What may account for the poem's assignably postwar location, its identifiably contemporary stress, its most notably modernist accent, is perhaps its legendary fragmentariness, its splendidly expressive discontinuity. This quality of fragmentariness was not a sharply marked feature in much of the material Eliot drafted into the initial sequence, but it was assisted considerably in 1921 through the editorial interventions of Pound (1971: *passim*). A "break" with the past is of course the establishing condition of the special present of modernism, of its radical Now, and the section-by-section, even line-by-line experience of discontinuity in *The Waste Land* can be taken as the signature expression of this founding circumstance – close equivalent of the immense watershed that the war itself defined.

Allowing for the mild irony that this hallmark work of poetic modernism infers rather than contains the determining event of the Great War, Eliot's sequence has assumed that place in the literary history. And so it is fitting to follow its legacy as a testamentary witness

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of that historical instigation: "I think the day by day in the Waste Land, the sudden violences and long stillnesses, the sharp contours and unformed voids of that mysterious existence, profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment. It is perhaps best described in Malory, book iv, chapter 15 – that landscape spoke 'with a grimly voice'" (Jones 1937/1963: x–xi).<sup>3</sup> So David Jones invokes the landscape he witnessed on the Western Front, where he served as an infantryman in the Royal Welch Fusiliers from 1915 to 1918. Here, in the Preface to his book-length poem *In Parenthesis* (1937), he turns the terrain of his combat experience into a rich crypt of literary history, using Eliot's poem as a touchstone for the poetic traditions that inform *The Waste Land* and provide the affective register for his own representations of the war.

It is not surprising, then, to find in Jones's poem a kind of history-in-miniature of the literary modernism that was put into exemplary practice in *The Waste Land*. The strategies and attitudes of that now accomplished literary tradition – discontinuous or episodic narratives, verbal textures that mix idiomatic concision with dense allusive references, a cast of dramatic characters-in-voice that matches the range of speakers in Eliot's vocal collage – do exemplary service in Jones's representation of his experience. Most particularly, Jones's poem (really a verse-with-prose experiment, an initiative this painter-writer could indulge in some part because his education in art school spared him the restrictions of the standard literary curriculum) turns a good deal of its imaginative action around this typically modernist challenge of "making it new." Most obviously, he adapts Joyce's hallmark instance of the technique Eliot named "the mythical method" (Eliot 1975: 178). For each of his narrative's seven parts he provides an epigraph from the early medieval Welsh bardic epic *Y Goddodin*. The older poet's account of the mustering, march, preparation, and consummation of the Battle of Catraeth, fought between local Britons (under the leadership of a figure who is the conjectured original of the legendary Arthur) and invading Saxons, affords one of the available analogues for this modern Welsh regiment meeting the new German army in 1916. These technical incentives join a great depth of legendary memory to the felt intensities of Jones's lived experience in the war.

<sup>3</sup> The introductory note by Eliot to the 1963 edition, recalling his major part in soliciting the work for publication by Faber in 1937, supplies context and literary history for the continuities he perceives between Jones's work and his own as well as Pound's and Joyce's.

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This technical regimen generates an imaginative record that represents the marking event of cultural modernism in one consummate instance of modernist prosodies.

In the last sentence of his Preface, Jones offers an explanation for the title of his book:

This writing is called "In Parenthesis" because I have written it in a kind of space between – I don't know between quite what – but as you turn aside to do something; and because for us amateur soldiers (and especially for the writer, who was not only amateur, but grotesquely incompetent, a knocker-over of piles, a parade's despair) the war itself was a parenthesis – how glad we thought we were to step outside its brackets at the end of '18 – and also because our curious type of existence here is altogether in parenthesis. (1937/1963: xv)

The omen encoded here is glossed best perhaps by the dates Jones inscribes just below this last sentence: "1<sup>st</sup> March 1937." No great precience was necessary at this moment to feel the next war coming. The image of the parenthetical bracket thus situates the composition of the book already but certainly in an interwar period. This figure encloses the same moment of historical experience, and it defines the same feeling about historical time, that we have seen on the far side of that second war, in the formulations of Eliot and Pound. Indeed, Jones is suggesting that the time of the modern – here modernist – century is defined by repeated, in effect, ongoing war. These are the conditions of a literary sensibility that takes the fracture of existing codes as provocation, and the challenge to precedent ideologies as warrant, for the inventions that would be preserved through the rest of the century as the record and legacy of the most important – newest, most timely – poetry of modern experience.

**Further Reading**

- Hobhouse, L. T. (1910). *Liberalism*. London: Williams & Norgate.  
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