Chapter II

“How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?”

Modernism: A Movement through Time.

The quicksands of the present are spread out on the past to be swept over to the future. The same is the case with movements, styles and social or literary evolutions. Each denounces its origin in the past, but inevitably becomes original either by duplicating the past, or by setting up the opposite. The concept of originality lies somewhere in the interstices of the ‘origin.’ The ineffaceable rootedness is there everywhere, and to be original is to reproduce, or re-produce that which is there already. As Paul Valery puts it in his, “Letter about Mallarme” talking about the nature of influence,

Whether in science or arts, if we look for the source of an achievement we can observe that what a man does either repeats or refutes what someone else has done - repeats it in other tones, refines or amplifies or simplifies it, loads or overloads it with meaning; or else rebuts, overturns, destroys and denies it, but thereby assumes it and has visibly used it. Opposites are born from opposites.

We say that an author is original when we cannot trace the hidden transformations that others underwent in his mind.¹

This also applies to baffling terms like modernism and post modernism that defy any proper definition or boundary. It can also provide a safer stance from the raging controversies on treating them as radical breaks, continuities or naïve processes of evolution. Any attempt to finish off modernism becomes another modernism, and the
task of defining modernism is beyond us. If the term 'modern' means catching up with 'here and now', modernism will never end, it will just retain its protean form though it may attenuate and diffuse itself more and more.

If modernism is taken as no more than an umbrella term in the service of movements as diverse as Impressionism, Aestheticism, Bohemianism, Symbolism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Vorticism, Futurism, Avant-Garde and so on, post modernism can be preserved for a sensibility that represents an epistemological break with the canonical moderns and that which compulsorily outmodems the moderns. The moderns faced a world devoid of order: fearing entropy, they intuited primarily through the potentialities of metaphor, myth and order, behind, within or above, the contemporary chaos. Yeats' gyres, Eliot's classicism, James Joyce's system of allusion and cyclical history are all efforts made in this direction. The new sensibility of the post modern rejects the modernist use of metaphor, history and myth to support a totalitarian obsession with order, by embracing the freedom of disorder. Thus the post modern sensibility defines itself by differentiating itself from its immediate ancestors by placing itself in opposition to them.

The common associations that modernism evokes are a movement towards sophistication and mannerism, toward introversion, technical display and internal self skepticism. Instead of confining itself to a new mode or manner in arts, it suggests a contemporary unhappy view of history and a crisis of culture. Malcolm Bradbury and James Mac Farlane in "The Name and Nature of Modernism" (Modernism: 1890-1930), treat it as a fresh condition of the human mind which dares to look at the world through a changed perspective:
Modernism has been used, from time to time, analogously to Romanticism, to suggest the general temper of the twentieth-century arts; it has equally been appropriated by those who wish to distinguish and isolate one current at one particular time... a powerful movement, certainly, and an international one reaching, like Romanticism, through the western cultures. It has been urged that Modernism is our inevitable art — as Gertrude Stein put it, the only composition appropriate to the new composition in which we live, the new dispositions of space and time.²

The question how modern Modernism was (were the modernists true revolutionaries, or as in Yeats’ words ‘last romantics,’) continues to provoke controversy. The term modernity describes the results of the period of philosophical, scientific and political upheavals commonly known as enlightenment. Undoubtedly the moderns were steeped in the romantic tradition they so strongly denied although their aspirations far exceed their times, making amazing catapults through time. Stan Smith in Origins of Modernism argues that if modernism appropriated its cultural antecedents, it didn’t supersede them. Rather it entered into symbiosis with them, drawing its lifeblood from what it came to ‘replace’, incorporating them in its own “pattern of timeless moments.” Though it appropriated and made new its many pasts, it retained what T. S. Eliot in “Tradition and Individual Talent” called ‘a perception not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence.’ According to Smith modernism draws its energies from the very forces it seeks to evade through displacement, transference and deferral. For him Tiresius is the trope of modernism itself, which returns to the origins only to flee real beginnings, which goes back to the source only to deny the event. He adds that modernism is the only
past postmodernism has, a past without time depth which it reduces to a host of a mere surface, the mute body upon which it inscribes its own secondary discourses, incorporating by replacing and erasing as it incorporates.³

Modemism was more than an aesthetic response but a distinctive style in the registering of consciousness or experience, not merely a problem in representation but a negotiation with a cultural and aesthetic crux, a problem in the making of structures, the corrosion of language, the unifying of form and the social meaning of the artist himself. When Pound and Eliot, Stravinsky and Picasso used the past, they incorporated fragments from the past in a structure stridently of the present: they emphasized grotesque disparities as well as harmonies: instead of a smooth surface they produced a broken one, which was both. There was a new articulation of space and time, time treated not as sequential and developmental, but as cyclical and repetitive. Robert Martin Adams puts it succinctly in “What was Modernism?”:

The past was not a series of incremental stages on the road to the present, it was a single pattern replicated pointlessly and potentially into infinity. History became a series of all-but-identical arabesques traced on sheets of transparent plastic and lined up behind one another, so that only a slight shift or perspective could transpose any particular story into the ‘Homeric age,’ the medieval era, the Renaissance or the ‘present.’ Whatever the momentary embodiment, the configuration would always be much the same. A hard and jagged style of disparate elements, juxtaposed without nexus or comment, and a chronological patterning of corresponding themes (like a shape in space, not a sequence in time), these were the
techniques that admirably suited the translucent vision. This was the first major distinctive style of modernism.  

The high summer of modernism was between the two world wars. To put under scrutiny the paradigms, mindsets, or weltanschauungen that made up literary modernism is a hazardous task. For Foucault, the shift from classical to the modern was one involving a loss of faith in the possibility of the perfect and transparent representation of truth and a growing uncertainty about knowledge and its acquisition. This has manifested itself in a self conscious and self reflexive concern with language, characteristic of most forms of modernity. The task of assigning dates to modernism (1907-25 in Frank Kermode's suggested time span, 1910-30 Peter Faulkner's, while others place the movement's origin much earlier and much later) is equally problematic. Modernism was indeed an international movement and a focus of many varied forces which reached their peak in various countries at various times. In some it seemed to stay for a long period; in others, to function as a temporary disturbance and then go away again.

Cyril Conolly's The Modern Movement: One Hundred Key Books from England, France and America (1880-1950) identifies France as the source from which Anglo-American Modernism drew strength. Another book Modern Tradition edited by Richard Ellmann and Charles Fiedelson acknowledges a modern tradition that reaches well back into the romantic era and beyond. The period of intensity is traced roughly to the first quarter of twentieth century, to Yeats and Joyce and Eliot and Lawrence and to their continental coevals Proust, Valery and Gide, Marne, Rilke and Kafka.

The modernist strategy is a trick with literary surfaces that involves fragmenting the mind, inviting the reader to construct constellations of significant shapes across
vacant gaps between them. It is a kind of structure that defines the strongest area of
surface as those where nothing is expressed. The artist was free to use a range of
materials- the revival of collage and the importation into painting of sand, cigarette butts,
linoleum, hair, straw, mud or anything else that came into hand. Joseph Frank in his
essay "The Spatial Form in Modern Literature," points out that, modern literature
exemplified by such writers as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, and James
Joyce, is moving in the direction of spatial form. This means that the reader is intended
to apprehend their work, spatially in a moment in time, rather than as a sequence. 7

In the early twentieth century, artist after artist, art after art, escapes from the
locked perspective that has only an opaque present to offer the mind. In an effort to
capture the 'moment' in the fleeting time, the mind unviolated by the idea, holds
converse with particulars ("Say it! No ideas but in things." P 18). The act of perception
and the art of articulation become an inextricable unit. This transforms a modern
painting into a poem, or a poem into a painting. Hugh Kenner in "Space Craft" in The
Pound Era elaborates on this aspect in Pound's work:

Moments of insight, moments when "painting or sculpture seems as if it
were 'just coming over into speech'" abound in the multifaceted Cantos,
whose principles their author most vividly formulated with his mind on a
sculptor (Gaudier) and a painter (Lewis). Such work implies space [. . .]
The fragments, the moments, shattering that block, recover time: through
each of them rushes process. 8 (33)

In the modernist phase many of the standard labels - Naturalism, Impressionism,
Symbolism, Imagism, Futurism and expressionism were forbiddingly intertwined and
overlapped producing a doubtful synthesis of many movements radically different in kind and degree. The Anglo-American Modernism of 20th century is paralleled by the contemporary movement in Germanic tradition, Expressionism. The Futurist developments tended to share with Expressionism a buoyant acceptance of the modern city, the modern machine and the sense of contingency, to pass on into English language, experimentalism. The expressionist treatment of the surface, of coloured forms without depth, was reflected in poetry. Abstract expressionism preceded Pop art in terms of its flattening of the picture plane and its emphasis up on the materials of painting rather than upon the illusionist perspective. In short, modernism was in most countries an extra-ordinary compound of the futuristic and nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and symbolistic, the romantic and the classical.

Harry Levins in his essay, "What was Modernism?" bids farewell to modernism to allow the new sensibility (postmodernism) the task of consolidating and assimilating the fruits of Modernism. William Spanos distinguishes the modern from postmodern imagination by their attitude towards time: while the modern escapes the destructive impact of time and change, by way of achieving the timeless eternity of the esthetic moment, or rather of "spatial form," the postmodern imagination continues to explore it through an art that confronts rather than flees from time. Modernist works frequently tend to be ordered not on the sequence of historical time or the evolving sequence of character, from history to story as in realism or naturalism: they tend to work spatially or through layers of consciousness, working towards a logic of metaphor or form. In its task to redeem the formless contingent reality, it negotiates with an apocalyptic and modern time, the timeless and the transcendental. The modernist sensibility turns to
plunge inward as in stream of consciousness novel or in Abstract Expressionist painting.

In painting the definitive advent of modernism is dated from the dramatic appearance of Fauves in the Paris Salon d'Automone of 1905, led by Henri Matisse. The Fauves were influenced by Gaugin and Van Gogh, and they conceived of composition as the art of arranging in a decorative manner the various elements at a painter's disposal for the expression of his feelings. If the appearance of the Fauves in 1905 marked the official debut of Modernism in the visual arts, Cubism has been marked by most historians as the central episode in modernist revolution. The modern movement acquired a public face with the emergence of futurism launched in February 1909. They were hostile to symbolism or the heritage of the past, yet possessed by a very traditional kind of machismo.

Baudelaire had been important not only as a poet but also as a gifted art critic, and Mallarme had been a close ally of most of the important artists of the time in France. This tradition which made the poets the analysts and critics of the new art, was continued by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918). The torrential flow of imagery (often connected with the city) unchecked by punctuation, larded with neologisms characterised the literary technique of Apollinaire. This anticipates the Cubist invention of Collage and looks forward to more elaborate effects of the same sort in the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.

Modernists like Eliot, Hulme, Williams and Richards wanted small, clean, resonant, self-contained things of which the image or symbol was the type. Since life does not offer itself in such neat packages, they had to struggle their way out of this
There is a strong urge in modernist writers to pierce through the messy phenomenal world to some perfect and necessary form and order. Modern literature presents us with the triumph of myth as a solipsistic form. The act of fictionality becomes the crucial act of imagining. Graham Hough in the "Modernist Lyric" (Modernism: 1890-1930), observes:

For the most part then the poets have refused the great public mythologies of our time and have evolved rival myths of their own, some grandiose and comprehensive, some esoteric and private, but none with any status in the world of organized scientific and historical knowledge by which the world conducts its business.  

By embracing disorder and contingency, the new sensibility of the post modern out-moderns the moderns eschewing the modernist obsession with structure, order and myth. Beckett emphasises that his work is not Joycean, Murdock calls for a novel opposed to the modernist delight in order and myth, Robbe-Grillet calls metaphor into question, Susan Sontag is against interpretation, William Hamilton says that the new optimism was born the day T. S. Eliot died. Thus the post modern sensibility defines itself by differentiating itself from its immediate ancestors and placing itself in opposition to them. The binaries recycle and repeat, supercede and recede, wax and wane with the passage of time.

Among literary movements, modernism is unique in defining itself as an absolute break with the past, including its own past. By abolishing textual continuity in literature (writers like Joyce and Eliot), harmony in music (Stravinsky and Schoenberg), and perspective in painting (Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee et al.), modernism cleaves a way out
of the trodden paths. Modernist works tend to remythologise the demythologization discourse of enlightenment. The urge is not merely to seek new horizons through bold experimentation. This is borne out of a negotiation with a cultural entropy that shatters all established ways of addressing experience. James Breslin puts it succinctly in "The End of the Line":

A 'modern poetry' is certainly a poetry that has grounded itself on a very slippery piece of territory; yet it is this very elusiveness and evanescence of the moment that creates the historical dynamic modernism [. . .]. In other words, modernity can be true to itself by continually denying itself: modernity is a radical enterprise, a perpetual crisis.¹³

Because it is an ever-renewing process, modernism replaces the tradition of the moment with another which in turn turns momentary. It works on the fringes of shifting grounds and perceptions.

**Modernism in the Making: Bergson, Nietzsche, Fenellosa, Pound and Williams.**

The end of nineteenth century had witnessed social, scientific, religious and psychological upheavals that resulted in a topsy-turvy attitude, relations and approach. The process of accelerating technological change led to an alteration of consciousness necessitating new forms, new epistemological and aesthetic structures to grasp the conditions of contemporary life. Karl Marx among others suggested that industrial revolution accelerated class difference and poverty; Darwin through his theory of evolution questioned the Christian version of creation; Einstein’s theory that relativity ruled even in the physical world undermined the validity of absolute truth; Nietzsche declared that God was dead and Sigmund Freud threatened the outward calm of
Victorian life by making man conscious and guilty of his unexpressed, suppressed and deep rooted selfish, sexual and natural desires.

As Science and Darwinism undermined the old religious and ethical order, Marxism and Socialism questioned the liberal orthodoxies of America. Einstein's theory of relativity implied a multiple perspective on the universe. Werner Heisenberg's formulation of the indeterminacy or uncertainty principle highlighted the viewpoint of the observer or spectator to determine things. The knowledge of reality became contingent on the particular perspective or perspectives assumed. Sigmund Freud with his naming of the 'unconscious' psyche which contains the unwitting domain by which patterns of past experience, both personal and racial, affect involuntarily the conscious self, subverted the notion of the free and unitary personality. Frazer's Golden Bough also highlighted a universal system of rituals that informs all cultures.

At the turn of the century, there was a paradigm shift from the developmental (before-and-after) thinking to the structural (surface-and-depth). In The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, And Early Twentieth Century Thought, Sanford Schwartz describes how this opposition took the form of opposition between 'conceptual abstraction' and 'immediate experience' in philosophy, to be dealt with in different ways by Bergson, F. H. Bradley, Williams James and Nietzsche. While Bergson identifies the sensory flux with a deeper consciousness to which we may gain access ('real duration'), Nietzsche treats the stream of appearances as a 'chaos of sensations' upon which we project our will to order (power). He argues in "Elements of the New Poetics," that while T. E. Hulme and Pound, absorbed Bergson's aesthetics to mould imagist poetry, there is a significant link between Nietzsche and the modernists, and by extension, between
post structuralist criticism. Sanford Schwartz explains how Modernism and post structuralism absorb these trends in different ways. He writes:

The Modernists, like James, are less extreme in their challenge to the traditional hierarchy that privileges rational form over sensory flux. Their strategy is to employ constructs that hold together identity and difference, conceptual unity and sensory multiplicity. [. . .] In response to the same issue, post structuralism assumes the more radical posture of Nietzsche. It does not merely challenge but deliberately subverts the hierarchy that grants priority to form over flux. [. . .] In other words, Modernist identity-indifference yields to the free play of difference. The text that embodies a unified system of relations gives way to the “absolutely plural text,” which is irreducible to a determinate network of relations, and suggests ever new ways of ordering its various elements.14

Nietzsche identifies human creativity with the power to produce new metaphors. This has inspired efforts to explore the relationship between logic and rhetoric, literal and figurative language which modernists avidly took up as a task, and which continues even today in Derrida and de Man. This led Pound to Fenellosa, whose The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry argues for the use of concrete and active images in English poetry on an analogy with Chinese ideograms which were according to him simplified pictures of actual things in the world. He wrote: “In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching things work out their own fate.”15 Fenellosa’s call for direct unmediated vision and for a closer relationship of transparency between words and objects found ready listeners in Pound and Williams.
Thus modernism was getting moulded in a new crucible of experience and expression. Virginia Woolf sums up the scenario in The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays (91-92)

In or about December 1910, human nature changed [...]. All human relations [...] shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Twentieth century poetry absorbed this modernism in its use of discontinuous styles, multiple levels of allusion and non-linear structures that opened up a triangular relationship between author, subject and reader. Freud's concern with dreaming suggested new possibilities for the poem and poets were encouraged to reshape not just their subject matter, but their language, their arts of consciousness and expression.

Ferdinand de Saussure with his new theory of linguistics proposed that a language should be studied as a unified field (synchronously and diachronically) as we actually experience it now and that the real world, to a large extent was built upon the language habits of the group. This engendered in the poets an interest for the distinctive social reality and a new treatment of language as an object as well as a medium with its own intrinsic substance and symmetry.

Ludwig Wittgenstein summed up the structuring tendencies in our vocabularies in Tractatus Philosopho-Logicus. Richard Gray in “Backgrounds: America, The Poem and The Twentieth Century” observes:

So it is hardly surprising that, even while Wittgenstein was composing his Tractatus, American poets were concentrating their minds just as fiercely on
problems of language, thought and reality: and they were discovering and defining— in their own ways, just as Wittgenstein was — what they saw as the personal, creative nature of all three. They were not being easily or thoughtlessly subjective. On the contrary, their approach was, like Wittgenstein's, a toughly objective one.¹⁷

What evolved out of this was a return to the bed rock idea of American culture and a re-linking of the cultural heritage of Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman and Dickinson sharing kinship with people like Yeats, Joyce, Lawrence, Darwin, Marx, Einstein, Freud, Wittgenstein and Saussure.

The heydays of American Modernism belong to the period of T. E Hulme, Ezra Pound, Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens and a few others. They were absorbed in evolving a new poetry cut off from its anchorings in traditional metre and rhyme. Roger Mitchell in "Modernism Comes to American Poetry: 1908 – 1920" (APTCP), writes:

'The heroic era of Modernism in American Literature', to use Eric Homberger's term, might be said to have begun in 1908 when Pound reached London, and ended, to indulge in a Modernist warping of time, in 1920 when Pound left London for France and in 1922 when Eliot published The Waste Land in the Dial.¹⁸

Poets like Pound, Williams, H.D and Stevens were seeking a new ground, sweeping aside the old, so that something new could be given room to grow.

Side by side with this Modernist exploration of the kinds and limits of perception, there opened up a vision of anarchy and despair made most vivid in works like The
Waste Land, and the novels of Franz Kafka. Williams’s long poem Paterson also discloses this widening seismic rift:

Divorce is

the sign of knowledge in our time

divorce! divorce! (P 18)

Roger Mitchell writes:

It is this vision that most seriously challenges the optimism of the scientific and bourgeois world view, and it is this vision, this “consuming negative passion,” that is customarily implied by the word “Modernism.” The idea of the modern as Irving Howe has said, is an idea of radical, not to say reactionary, isolation, a condition in which people feel themselves cut off from each other and from all systems of religion and philosophy.19

Ezra Pound shepherded the American modernist tendencies through new pathways shaping out and bringing to light works by writers like Eliot and James Joyce, and inviting and inspiring a host of writers. It was his personal force that moulded ‘modernism’ as a conscious literary effort in America which drew a group of writers in to the fold: William Carlos Williams, Ford Madox Ford, Wyndham Lewis, Hilda Doolittle and Marianne Moore. His tenets on Imagism later paved way for Vorticism when he abandoned Imagism to Amy Lowell and started Vorticism with Lewis. Vorticism drew strength from the energising past and in Blast (1914) Pound crystallised ‘modernism’ into the “Vortex”:

The Vortex is the point of maximum energy. […] All experience rushes into this vortex. All the energised past, all the past that is living and
worthy to live. All MOMENTUM, which is the past bearing upon us, RACE, RACE-MEMORY, instinct charging the PLACID, NON-ENERGISED FUTURE.

The DESIGN of the future [is?] in the grip of the human vortex. All the past that is vital, all the past that is capable of living into the future, is pregnant in the vortex, NOW.²⁰

This transmissible mental energy condensed in the vortex transcends the compartmentalised concepts of time as past present and future, unfolding an English parallel to Cubism. This in turn led him and others to the heuristic possibilities of fragmentation and dissociation, to the premises of the 'compendious epic' to the possibilities of unspecified voices and to the farrago of history.

Herbert N. Schneidau in his study of "Ezra Pound: The Archaeology of the Immanent," WAKING GIANTS: The Presence of the Past in Modernism writes:

Modernism belongs to an age when the very meaning of the term the past underwent enormous expansion: in the nineteenth century it signified a few millennia at most, but in the twentieth its extent, and significance, has been multiplied exponentially. Pound's work takes on its true import in view of that great shift in the dimensions of our imagined, represented world. If today our new translations help us discover an earthy richness and power in ancient texts, such as those of Homer or the Bible, this is not only a matter of Pound's insistence on the demotic in translation. These texts have new dimensions for us because we see an immense panorama of prehistory behind them, and
thus the chthonic matrix from whence they emerged. They are of the earth, earthy in the best sense. Modernism prepared us for the excavation of this treasure.

Modernist – Postmodernist Trends in America: A Historical Sketch

The term ‘Modernism’ is far too connotative to be confined to period limits and arbitrary closures. The word even now in the common man’s parlance stands for the new and the novel, especially in scientific and technological fields that are subjected to constant change and updating. Hence in tracing modernist trends, focus can only be given to the changed responses and perspectives that each historical situation engendered. The book A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry edited by Jack Myres and David Wojahan gives a graphic picture of the growth of American poetry upto its present state, different essays focusing on different stages of its growth. The gist of a historical sketch that follows is culled from these insights and approaches.

The modernist notions of twentieth century American poets were moulded by the Whitman and Dickinson tradition. Whitman through incorporating the native attitudes and respect for the continent, advocated an open form public poetry which embodied the social reality. Dickinson was for a closed private poetry which embodied the psychological reality. Whitman's clarion call “make it new,” resounded in modern poets like Pound and Williams whose life long mission was to warp out an indigenous American language free from the stiff and the stereotyped European models.

Whitman's Song of Myself in Leaves of Grass illustrates the true shape of the American epic, a shape that was to be imitated by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane in later days. Whitman initiated a poetic tradition based on openness, freedom
and individualism. Through her disruptive use of rhythm and frequent use of discords or half rhymes, Dickinson emphasised the dislocated, disjunctive and arbitrary nature of her art.

Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869 - 1935) inspired by European naturalists like Zola, experimented with points of view, and his famous poem 'Richard Cory' exhibits modernist trends, as we find in it an inner scepticism and a bold use of the language of everyday speech. Robert Frost (1874 - 1963) was pre modern in his literary leanings but vocally anti modern. In spite of his vociferous rejection of new poetry (i.e. free verse) juxtaposing fragments and languages, mixing classical allusions and contemporary events - also anticipate the method of Waste Land. The Waste Land with its sense of his poems like 'Mending Wall' expose a condition of paradox in a world and maintain a Zolaesque naturalism.

The first world war wrought its havoc and poets who wrote between 1918 and 1929 inherited a fallen world. The blood drenched reality coloured their vision which turned chaotic and disjunctive, and consciousness, language and writing seemed more problematic than in earlier times. Pound's seminal post war poem 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberly' (1920) and T.S.Eliot's The Waste Land (1922) hold a mirror up to this decadence and disintegration. The central themes of Mauberly are the overriding tyranny of modern life and the relentless pressure it exerts upon the individual. Many of its formal devices - especially the way it radically changes its ground, shifting perspective, the unreal city and the walking dead, historical voices and fragmented experiences was a replica of a modernist predicament. If I.A.Richards called it the disillusionment of a generation, poets like William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane
disliked the negativism of the poem and felt betrayed by it (Edward Hirsch, APTCP 56). Eliot and Pound created an American version of continental modernism. They were intent on re-establishing the connection between a fragmentary and chaotic present and a harmonious European past. Eliot's idea of historical continuity in his essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent' (1919) and his theories of de-personalisation of poetry were attempts to anchor American poetry on European grounds.

The American Modernism of the twenties took regional form in the work of three southern poets - John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Warren who associated with the Fugitive group. Like Eliot and Pound they worked on a counter current to free verse revolution and wrote within traditional forms. The twenties saw the emergence of an indigenous modernism antithetical to the international (continental) modernism propounded by Eliot and Pound. William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore together created and defined a modernist poetry of the New World, a local, home made American poetic. Their poetry was a radical break from traditional ways of presentation; in addressing the contemporary reality they allowed objects to intrude into the poetic canvas in all their inviolability and sanctity. It comes out clearly in Williams's own expression of it in Moore's poems (Imagination, 314,315): "To Miss Moore an apple remains an apple whether it be in Eden or the fruit bowl where it curls." Williams's Kora in Hell, Improvisations (1920), Sour Grapes (1921) and Spring and All (1923), show how he evolved this cultural aesthetic in poetry as well as prose. Paterson, the long poem, is a bold experiment in creating a disjunctive surrealistic text that defies rational logic and coherence. Marianne Moore's first pamphlet of 24 poems, Poems (1921) and her first American book Observations show how the testimony of the eye
constitutes the basic premise of her ethics.

Edward Hirsch in “Helmet of Fire: American Poetry of the 1920s” (APTCP) observes:

In addition to the international Modernism of Pound and Eliot and indigenous Modernism of Moore and Williams, the romanticism of Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, and, to a much larger degree, Archibald MacLeish stands as a powerful tradition to emerge in American poetry in the twenties. [...]. Stevens’s claim that “the whole effort of imagination is towards the production of the romantic” and even that “the imagination is the romantic” is one of the motivating premises of their explicitly Modernist poetic.22

Stevens’s collection of poems in Harmonium (1923, 1931) explore a new knowledge of reality ordered through imagination. Crane’s White Buildings (1926) a collection of 28 poems, the lyrical masterpiece Voyages (1921-25) and the long poem The Bridge (1923-29), seek a new order of consciousness which can rise above American materialism to reach a spiritually elevated plane. The female lyricists of the twenties took to romantic routes and they include Elinor Wylie, Sara Teasdale, Edna St Vincent Millay, Leonie Adams and Louise Bogan. Their poetry crave for self assertion and authorship in a male dominated world, and is visionary in its quest for an absolute truth to replace a lost world.

In the 1930’s the ravages of the second world war added to the momentum of drifting grounds and heralded a depression decade. The socialist movements in Europe and the labour unions in the United States sounded the ideological war of Right and Left. Writers were making defensive and often programmatic statements about their
work and that of others and the lure of the Left was strong on writers like Mike Gold. Pound and Williams, nearing fifty in mid thirties, stuck on to the purely aesthetic side of art and they were the older generation of the modernists. They shared sympathies with the emergent objectivist group of poets which included George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff and Lorine Niedecker. Their seminal essay entitled “An Objective” not only defined an ‘objectivist’ poetics but offered a kind of honour code of writing appropriate to the times.

Zukofsky wrote in *Prepositions: The Collected Essays* (12): “the poet’s form is never an imposition of history but the desirability of making an order out of history as felt and conceived.” This urge to order out history consonant with the times was to be carried out with ‘sincerity’ without blinkers in the facticity of social reality. In 1993 the Objectivist Press brought out an *Objectivist Anthology* which included work by Williams, Oppen, Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi and Kenneth Rexroth. The objectivists placed primary emphasis on the formal structure of the poem and its physical contours, and took more interest in its musical properties. For Oppen, words not only consist of the lexicon of the real but are to be used as an objectivist ‘test’ of sincerity to the moment. This is the moment that embodies a temporality which bears the weight of history.

Michael Heller observes in *Conviction’s Net of Branches: Essays on Objectivist Poets and Poetry*

[... ] the division of Poundian and Objectivist poetics strikes me as hinging on this difference: that in Objectivist poetry, there is a profound sense “of one’s time,” that the retort from which one forges any line of verse must first pass through the furnace of personality and history.
The time bound, provisional moment that the objectivist focuses on is historical only in the sense that behind it lies the poet's knowledge of history and the world.

The original objectivists took strong leftist political positions and gradually, Objectivism as a movement disbanded itself. In the last years of the decade, a general break down of values occurred, followed quickly by an atmosphere of recriminations and distrust. Writers like W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and C. D. Lewis (the Marxist oriented group of English poets) show the tensions of the politically weary writer and the ambivalence between high modern art and the impulse to provide meaningful social commentary. Poets like Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop stood firm on their grounds free from political turmoil. Fascism and communism were anathema to Williams and he kept a combative distance from all such ideologies. Objectivism helped him in his search for an indigenous poetic technique and tradition. His poems exhibit the modern impulse, "a self reflexive suspiciousness of obvious ideologies and traditions" (Michael Heller, "Utopocalypse: The American Poetry in the 1930's," APTCP 97).

The end of the thirties saw the emergence of new writers such as Delmore Schwartz, Kenneth Fearing, David Ignatow, Josephine Miles, Theodore Roethke and Mary Sarton. It is relevant here to quote Michael Heller (APTCP 100):

Yet it must be remembered that what Modernism seeks is some notion of a "usable past" to marshal against a culture that seems inauthentic and oppressive. Hence, along with its vices, its reinvention of traditions, it can also develop great self-reflexivity and suspiciousness – indeed, develop a capacity to continually undermine its own presuppositions.
In an attempt to revitalise the past, Stevens ventured on a dramatic voyage between imagination and reality in his works Parts of a World (1942), Auroras of Autumn (1950) and The Man with the Blue Guitar (1937). Williams hit on the triadic line (the three-step line) which was rooted in the Anglo-Saxon accentual verse. The other notable poets of the 1940’s were Randall Jarrell (more a literary critic than a poet), John Berryman (like Jarrell dealing with psychologically and philosophically oriented poems), Robert Lowell, Allen Tate, Elizabeth Bishop, Theodore Roethke, and Kenneth Rexroth.

In the 1950’s the literary movements got interrelated and formed hybrid mixtures and combinations. The Beat generation of poets followed the lineage set by Whitman, and their cultural pluralism and broad principles of inclusion were unified by the incantatory line. The Black Mountain School recast the poem on the lines of perception set by Pound and Williams. The New York School made use of the compositional technique of Abstract Expressionism and absorbed the aspects of Pop culture. Reversing the new critical stance of the separation of the poet and the poem, the Confessionals made the poem a mirror of their self.

Charles Olson’s seminal essay on “Projective Verse” appeared in 1950, and it was an inspired continuation of the work of Williams and Pound. It offered a new description of the free verse line as a unit of breath, whose nature was decided by the speaker’s or the writer’s sensibility. Olson advocated an ‘open form’ shaped out by the dynamic relation of breath and perception. Mark Doty comments in his essay “The Forbidden Planet” of Character: The Revolutions of the 1950’s.” (APTCP140):

Olson and his colleagues hammered out the notion of “projective verse” or “open” or “organic” form -- a notion which both addressed the work of Pound
and Williams in retrospect and guided the work of poets who followed in Olson's lineage, particularly Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov [...]. Olson's long poems then, such as *Maximus* sequence, work by means of complex juxtapositions of present and past, replicating or recording the speaker's field of perception.

For Robert Creeley, in the pattern of perception lay the operation of the intellect and his breath determined lines of poems possess great clarity and concentration. Denise Levertov translated insistence on breath as a measure of the line into a more complex system of lineation regarding both the duration of breath and the instant of perception as the line's ingredients. Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956) was a daring howl on the decline of academic verse and signalled the advent of a powerful brand of poetry, the Beats, who wrote from unmentionable, till then considered unspeakable realms of experience.

There was a tremendous black migration to Northern cities after the war and consequently a strong reaction to the repressive violence of the whites. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance were inflamed with a new black consciousness and fervent racial pride. These poets who had gravitated to Harlem wrote for the resurrection and realisation of the self-worth of the black people, and the powerful voices were Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Langston Hughes. The Beat poets were absolutely committed to the Jazz aesthetics and the two prominent among them were Bob Kaufman on the West Coast and Le Roi Jones in Greenwich village. The furore created by the Black aesthetic mellowed down in the 1970's and 1980's. The poems of poets like Haki R. Madhubuti, formerly Don L. Lee, reflect a softening in
As the 1960's got underway there was a plethora of changes that were unsettling. It was an era of jet travel, direct dialling, credit card, space exploration and rapid growth in communication. Though comforts came to man on the physical plane, discomforts arose from historical events such as Cuban missile crisis. Leslie Ullman gives a graphic picture in "American poetry in the 1960's" (APTCP 191-92):

As a result of all these developments, individuals are forced to undergo a quaking of the boundaries between the self and the world [. . .]. The world itself seemed to have grown much smaller and more complex. Time seemed to expand as a moment-by-moment construct without actually slowing. History no longer moved in it's old, linear fashion but seemed to explode in layers of crisis and discovery. [. . .] the necessity to define some strong hold within the self arose as a necessary response to the phenomenon of a changed reality. Forms of this response found expression in the burgeoning popularity of psycho analysis and encounter groups, mind expanding drugs, and sensationalistic forms of art, all of which sought to develop or emphasise the self, that construct of perception and consciousness, as the locus of experience and meaning.

The raw, irrepressible self poured out through personalised experience of Confessional Poetry, and Robert Lowell and John Berryman were the pioneers. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton wrote in a more direct and intense use of the personal. The Projectivists became part of the mainstream in the sixties and Robert Duncan and Gary Snyder extended the original Projectivist's tenets even further from their strictly
surrealistic poetry at the most prominent representative of this legacy was Mark Strand who practised plainness of diction with a certain reliance on surrealistic techniques. In the twentieth century there was a celebration and affirmation of a new woman-identified consciousness and poets like Muriel Rukeyser, Sara Teasdale and Adrienne Rich, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, Carolyn Kizer, Maxine Kumin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and Sharon Old. Their scales of extremes vary from “the radical lesbian feminism of Adrienne Rich to the conservative, close-mouthed feminism of Elizabeth Bishop” and reach the feminist levels of Sharon Olds, which exude a freedom of expression empowering both men and women, and envision a world of co-existence with a new sense of equality and harmony (Kate Daniels, “The Women’s Movement,” APTCP 242). Two important American women poets of the day are Carolyn Forche and Carolyn Kizer. Carolyn Kizer’s Yin bagged the 1985 Pulitzer prize. In American male poetry since 1976, there is a most vital strand of “new realism”- an exposure not of veiled truths about gender and power but of the hidden cause of middle class comfort in American society. Poets like C. K. Williams, Brendan Galvin and Richard Hugo are prominent. The two styles, new formalism (of writers like Leithauser and Vikram Seth), and language poetry (Charles Bernstein) developed in the early eighties reflected divisions evolving in the socio-economic structure of America under the Regan Administration. Vikram Seth’s Golden Gate is an entire novel in New Formalist line, having 307 pages in verse. John Ashbery and Robert Hass are the most critically acclaimed poets of our moment and the definitive impact of the meditative later poems of Wallace Stevens are models for Ashbery and Hass.
While the New Formalism retrieves the genteel stand of ironic, fixed form, Language Poetry works on the premises of the enormous potentiality of language to create the 'subject' and to abolish the distinctions between different discourses and genres. The Language Poets thus asserts "the rights of the signifier." (Jonathan Holden, "American Poetry: 1970-1990," APTCP 272). Together with these new trends, the shift in poetic authority has also taken place and critics like Marjorie Perloff, Charles Altieri and David Walker uphold the creative role of the reader in making the poem.25

To sum up, a note can be made from the evaluation of Jack Myres and David Wojahan (preface X) who point to three major trends in the 1990's as three specific simultaneous developments under way - the ongoing solidification of 'mainstream' conversational poetry, the abstract self referential poetry of both the language and continuum poets, and the revival of traditional forms and meter by the New Formalists.
Notes


6Quoted by Maud Ellman in “Foreword,” in Rainer Emig, Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures and Limits (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1995) VII, who writes: “The notorious difficulty of assigning dates to modernism (1907-25 in Frank Kermode's suggested time span, 1910-30 Peter Faulkner's while others place the movements 'origin much earlier and much later) reflects the temporal discomfort of the modernists themselves, their sense of being 'out of key' or 'posthumous with time.'


8. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: California UP, 1971) 33. Kenner gives an in-depth study of the mode of perception in the Pound era that was a fine amalgam of different ways looking at reality. The reading of the Pound era, like its writing, discerns patterns of diction and gathers meaning from non-consecutive arrays. Language becomes the total apprehension of the human mind in time and space and the Chinese ideogram, later moulded into image, symbol, and vortex and such, were efforts to capture objects (reality) in time and space.


11. Graham Hough, "The Modernist Lyric," *Modernism: 1890-1930*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane 318. Hough argues that Rilke refused to be analysed by Freud; Joyce refused to be analysed by Jung and Lawrence thought he had refuted the whole psycho-analytic system.


American Poetry, 1945-1965 (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983) 10. According to him the history of American poetry is not a "continuity " as Roy Harvey Pearce puts it, but a series of discontinuities, eruptions of creative energy that suddenly alienate poetry from what had come to seem its essential and permanent nature.

14Sanford Schwartz, The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, And Early Twentieth Century Poetry (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1985) 214. Schwartz argues that Nietzsche's writings have been so influential in recent years that the "New Nietzsche" is hailed as one of the great prophets of contemporary thought.

15Ernest Fenollosa, The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry, ed. Ezra Pound (California: City Lights, 1936) 9. In this essay, Fenollosa discusses the fundamentals of all aesthetics. The Principles of writing expounded here, anticipates the tendencies of modern painting and poetry.


19Mitchell 32.

"Ezra Pound: The Archaeology of the Immanent,"

WAKING GIANTS: The Presence of the Past in Modernism (New York, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 271. The view projected is that modernism was activated by the force of the past erupting into the present and that it was 'largely' due to Pound's personal force that it gained validity as a conscious literary effort.


