

The Art of Twentieth- Century American Poetry

Modernism and After

Charles Altieri

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2006

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Altieri, Charles, 1942–

The art of twentieth-century American poetry : modernism
and after / Charles Altieri.

p. cm.—(Blackwell introductions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-2106-4 (hard cover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-2106-8 (hard cover : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-2107-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-2107-6 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. American poetry—
20th century—History and criticism. 2. Modernism (Literature)—
United States. I. Title. II. Series.

PS310.M57A577 2006

811'.509112—dc22

2005012328

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Meridien

by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Printed and bound in India

by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd, Kundli

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operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured
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chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that
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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book was fun to write. It felt a natural outgrowth of my teaching, and it seemed license just to read poems as complex acts of thinking and feeling – what got me into this profession to start with. It is also fun to round up what are now all the usual suspects to thank for their help in working out my arguments – Charles Molesworth, Marjorie Perloff, Lyn Hejinian, Cheryl Walker, and Henry Staten in particular. There are also new subjects to thank – especially Brian Glaser, Joshua Clover, Geoffrey O’Brien, John Shoptaw, Kimberly Tsau, Charles Sumner, Jen Scappetone, Omri Moses, Margaret Ronda, and Charles Tung. I am most grateful to the writers I engage in this book for having given intense pleasure for now over forty years. But I have to apologize to the many scholars from whom I have learned a great deal that has enhanced that pleasure: the format of this series simply does not allow precise acknowledgment of one’s scholarly debts.

It has been a great pleasure working with the staff at Blackwell, especially Emma Bennett, Karen Wilson, and my copy-editor Jacqueline Harvey. Everyone has proven efficient, intelligent, and affable – an increasingly rare combination of attributes. Not having to track down permissions myself will provide the impetus to write another book. Andrew McNeillie, then at Blackwell, deserves special mention because it was he who talked me into this project. Now I can be grateful.

I cannot track the lineage of the ideas presented here. Some sections derive from various essays I have written; some from dismay at what I had not written as I dealt with modernist topics. I do know the basic argument was developed in response to an invitation from the

American Literature Association to give a keynote talk at a mini-conference on modern poetry. I want to thank the organizers for their faith, and *American Literary History* for publishing a version of it. I also want to thank the several audiences who have heard arguments that eventually found a place in this book for their kindness and their patience.

The idea of patience brings me to domestic settings. It is an immense blessing that my wife Carolyn Porter is very well endowed with this virtue, as well as her more flamboyant and endearing qualities. And the idea of blessings brings me to my daughter Laura. I cannot imagine what life would be like if there were not this extremely intelligent and sensitive adult who is by nature and by culture compelled to like me, and indeed be like me. For the latter I sometimes pity her; for the former I always am full of gratitude. Dedicating this book to her is a small token of what our friendship still promises.

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- Robert Lowell, excerpt from "Colloquy at Black Rock," "Skunk Hour," "The March 1," and excerpt from "Waking in the Blue," from Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (eds.), *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003.
- Mina Loy, "Gertrude Stein," excerpt from "Sketch of a Man on a Platform," and "XXIV," from Roger L. Conover (ed.), *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems of Mina Loy*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC and Carcanet Press Limited. Works of Mina Loy copyright © 1996 by the Estate of Mina Loy.
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William Carlos Williams, "Descent of Winter," "The Rose is Obsolete," "Spring Strains," "To a Young Housewife," and "You Have Pissed Your Life," from Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (eds.), *The Collected Poems: 1909–39, Volume 1*. New York: New Directions, 1991. Copyright © 1938 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. and Carcanet Press Limited.

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Abbreviations

Full details of each reference can be found in the list of Works Cited at the end of the book.

Ashbery, SP	John Ashbery, <i>Selected Poems</i>
Auden, CP	W. H. Auden, <i>Collected Poems</i>
Bishop, CP	Elizabeth Bishop, <i>The Complete Poems 1927–1979</i>
Creeley, CP	Robert Creeley, <i>The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley 1945–1975</i>
CWC	Ernest Fenollosa, “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry”
DH	W. H. Auden, <i>The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays</i>
EK	Ron Loewinsohn (ed.), <i>The Embodiment of Knowledge</i>
Eliot, CP	T. S. Eliot, <i>The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot</i>
Eliot, SE	T. S. Eliot, <i>Selected Essays</i>
FD	Adrienne Rich, <i>The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950–1984</i>
GB	Ezra Pound, <i>Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir</i>
Hughes, CP	Langston Hughes, <i>The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes</i>
LE	Ezra Pound, <i>Literary Essays of Ezra Pound</i>
LLB	Mina Loy, <i>The Lost Lunar Baedeker</i>
Lowell, CP	Robert Lowell, <i>Collected Poems</i>
MM	Henri Bergson, <i>Matter and Memory</i>
Moore, CP	Marianne Moore, <i>The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore</i>
NCP	George Oppen, <i>New Collected Poems</i>

P	Ezra Pound, <i>Personae: Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound</i>
Pound, SP	Ezra Pound, <i>Selected Prose, 1909–1965: Ezra Pound</i>
<i>Prepositions</i>	Louis Zukofsky, <i>Prepositions</i>
Rich, PP	Adrienne Rich, <i>Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose</i>
Stevens, CP	Wallace Stevens, <i>The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens</i>
TFW	Henri Bergson, <i>Time and Free Will</i>
Williams, CP	William Carlos Williams, <i>The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams</i> , vol. 1
Williams, SE	William Carlos Williams, <i>Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams</i>

Introduction

The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: An Overview

Writing an introduction to modernist American poetry has proven an interesting exercise in self-definition. When I agreed to this project, I had the simple idea that an introductory book combined accessible prose on a general topic with an ability to intensify whatever interests brought readers to the book in the first place. I did not realize how many difficult practical decisions there would be about what to include and exclude; nor did I realize the range of possibilities for envisioning what audiences desired or how authors might provoke interest in the topic.

Consider the two books Blackwell has already published as introductions to twentieth-century poetry. In *21st-Century Modernism: The New Poetics*, Marjorie Perloff has chosen to be highly selective, developing a specific vision of the course of modern poetry, mostly in Europe. She makes a brilliant case that there is a direct line from the experimental spirit of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* to Language Writing at the end of the twentieth century. World War I intervened, deadening the spirit of experiment and bringing to poetry in English a renewed ponderousness that it has taken almost a century to overcome: "Ours may well be the moment when the lessons of early modernism are finally being learned."¹

Christopher MacGowan's *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* takes the opposite tack.² Rather than choose a specific path through the twentieth

century, MacGowan tries to be as inclusive as possible. He writes superbly condensed, highly informative essays situating the important poets in each major development in modern American poetry; he provides instructive essays on topics like poetry's relation to the other arts and the American long poem; and he offers capsule accounts of forty-eight poetic careers before attending more closely to twenty-five volumes by some of these poets.

Having read these and other introductions to modern poetry, I cannot say I am any the clearer about what an introduction should be. But I am much clearer about how I might be fully engaged by the task and hence perhaps be of use to others without repeating work that has already been done quite well. Any student who wants basic information about the poets is likely to be satisfied by MacGowan's book. That is an enormous relief for me because I could never organize so much so well. Thanks to MacGowan, I can pursue a more idiosyncratic path through twentieth-century American poetry, concentrating on relatively difficult writers who considered their work a challenge to traditional notions of poetry. That brings me close to Perloff, although there are large differences that will soon emerge. We share a sense that once the information is available in a book like MacGowan's, a new introductory book can concentrate on enhancing the intellectual and affective pleasures available in attending imaginatively to the work these poets produce.

My title is my way of celebrating this sense of freedom to set my own purposes. I want to establish ways of enjoying this challenging material, which means illustrating one way a reader might think about what he or she is reading. As I proceed, I try not to forget that this is an introduction geared towards a literate public, especially to advanced undergraduate and graduate students studying these materials seriously for the first time. But I want to emphasize the pleasures that can be involved as readers learn to participate thoughtfully in the worlds that the works develop. And participating thoughtfully requires confronting substantial difficulty – both in handling the concepts that frame the issues the poets faced and in exploring how particular poems explore quite complex experiences. For me much of the pleasure in modernist poetry consists in engaging these difficult materials in a way that never quite brings peace, although it does bring increasing recognition of why the difficulties are necessary. So there will be times when this book will prove somewhat rough going. However,

I shall be careful to indicate why the difficulty is significant so that we can honor the poetic intelligence grappling with the problems.

As will be obvious, my agreement with Perloff's sense of how to present an introduction to modern poetry does not extend to sharing her vision of what matters in the story that the introduction provides. Her story is fundamentally one of loss and rediscovery based on very few exemplary figures. My story will present a more dialectical narrative emphasizing the sense of liberation provided by early modernist formal experiments, then the disappointment that followed in the 1930s when those discoveries proved very difficult to correlate with the capacity to address pressing social needs; the third stage consists of three generations of poets unwilling to reject modernist stylistic breakthroughs even though they also recognized the limitations in the rationales for the breakthroughs. Because these poets realized that they could not continue maintaining the sharp modernist distinctions between poetry and rhetoric that enabled them to subsume social into spiritual problems, they tried to reformulate their strategies to elaborate new ways for poetry to take social responsibility.

We can flesh out this dialectic a little by focusing, first, on the experimental climate of early Anglo-American modernism and the cultural needs these experiments were intended to address. In my classes I introduce this material by concentrating on what the writers are repudiating, since writers are discursively much clearer on what they reject than on the alternatives they are trying to produce. Their actual work can represent the positive side in all its complexity. Moreover, because the negative discursive statements tend to be quite general, they provide the best index of how the writers imagine they can make an impact on cultural life.

This book will stress two basic modernist refusals of basic values in the culture they inherited. The first is essentially epistemological, the second psychological. (One could call the second "ethical" if the rubric had not been horribly cheapened by overuse.) The epistemological refusal consists in the poets' turning from ideals of sensitive description and symbolic representation to pursue what they saw as links between a new realism in science and a "presentational" realism possible for poetry. In their eyes, the old realism was based on ideals of copying nature in order to disclose principles of behaviour that could be generalized. So the modernists criticized the static nature of those pictures and the authoritative position this model gave the

picture-maker. Hence William Butler Yeats' influential attack on Lucien Stendhal's ideal that a masterpiece could be likened to "a mirror dawdling down a lane."³ To Yeats, Stendhal's image suggests both a disturbing distance from his materials and a dangerously imperious sense of authority born of that distance.

The new realism, on the other hand, found its roots in the emerging scientific methods which emphasized not the copy but the sensations produced by events. The pictures produced by the mind seemed less important than the actual processes, where the relations among sensations could be seen as the products of natural and mental forces. In fact the new realism was leery of any effort to isolate a "mind": what mattered was the activity by which intensities became "realized." Ian Bell has written a terrific book outlining the various influences that such sciences had on Ezra Pound's formulation of possibilities for new modes of writing.⁴ Here I will presuppose Bell's work on the scientists in order to concentrate instead on a philosopher and a painter, Henri Bergson and Paul Cézanne, who developed the conceptual and practical frameworks by which this new science entered the literary world. These were the central figures in showing how the old realism was bound to the logic of the copy and of the type, and they made striking the challenge for artists to develop what I shall call a "presentational realism," stressing not accuracy to the object but accuracy to the felt moment of perception. As T. S. Eliot said of Bergson, this new thinking used "science against science" to establish "the reality of a fluid, psychological world of aspect and nuance, where purposes and intentions are replaced by pure feeling."⁵

The second, "psychological" set of negatives was much more broad and diffuse. The young modernists acutely felt the pressure of entrenched values and, worse, of entrenched personality types that the culture established in order to preserve those values. Consider how often the early work of T. S. Eliot, Mina Loy, and Ezra Pound turned to snapshot portraits in which only a few traits sufficed to skewer representative characters embodying the "sincere" ego of romantic poetry and the "righteous ego" of Victorian moralizing discourse. Young artists in every generation probably want to treat their elders this way. But the modernists could do so boldly because they thought their art sufficiently complex to model new ways to imagine the psyche at work. The poets might not know quite what their experiments in literary psychology could release, but they knew all too well the need

for some kind of relief from an over-moralized world long on opinion and short on fresh intense modes of feeling. Senses activated by the work's stress on internal relations might become testimony to possibilities of a desperately needed new psychology.

Taken together, modernist efforts to project such a psychology might be considered a new "constructivist expressionism." The old expressionism they saw as an essentially "romantic" effort to cut away every rhetorical device and ideological position that prevented the individual from articulating sincere personal responses to immediate particular situations. While the early modernists wanted to keep this sense of the intricate immediacy of experience, they felt a new expressionism was necessary in order to repudiate the postures and roles that had accreted around the notion that poetic authority depended on demonstrating capacious sincerity. For a poetics based on an ideal of sincerity simply had to ignore the many ironic factors that might undercut the pose of self-mastery. And, more important for the young poets resisting such sincerity, this stance could be seen as misplacing cultural authority because it made authority dependent on the display of character rather than on the display of what attention could see and language realize. Therefore the modernists treated expression as an ideal based not on the character of the writer but on the constructive activity giving the object a distinctive play of forces that is impossible to summarize in any discursive practice.

Consider the example of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," a poem I shall engage later in this book:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd
Petals on a wet black bough.

There is no overt speaker here, and no scene of moralized discovery with which to ennoble sincerity. Here what matters is the audience's participation in an intricately unfolding sense of metaphoric expansiveness. This highly condensed utterance (cut down, Pound tells us, from a thirty-line poem) stresses the power of the constructive act to make such attention immediately compelling. Just listen to the range of crisp vowel sounds and the intricate shift between nature and what we might call "unnature" or myth – the apparitional quality of the underworld made even more insistent by the lack of explicit connection to the physical details of the last line.

The most important psychological feature of this new constructivism for me is its impersonality, its reliance on the expressive power of the work rather than the expressive power of the artist's meditative presence. This aspect of modernist poetry is now much maligned, but I hope to justify the emphasis by showing how it responded powerfully to social conditions that the poets felt they had to change. "Sincerity" is a tricky ideal, since, as Jean-Paul Sartre showed, being intent on sincerity focuses attention on the role one is playing and detracts from the attention to the object one is claiming to be sincere about. Therefore sincerity is a dangerous model for cultural authority because it honors the appearance of virtue rather than demanding that virtue prove itself by actually getting down to work that engages the interests of other people.⁶ So the modernists tried to show that there were alternative stances that might establish strong suspicions about the power of self-consciousness to master emotional turbulence. Engendering such suspicions then might call attention to the play of desires at several levels of consciousness, and so might construct an ideal audience aware of how the experience of such subtle resonance is in fact shared – on both conscious and unconscious levels. Moreover, by occupying positions not bound to the ways society reinforces the imaginary authority of the ego, poetry could invest entirely in compositional rather than rhetorical energies.⁷ As T. S. Eliot put it, by breaking down grand emotions into "very varied feelings," those feelings would be "at liberty to enter into new combinations."⁸ Impersonality encouraged writers to explore those strange transpersonal sites where what seem common terms of suffering open into transcendental visions.

Modernism was immensely successful in altering taste because the new realism and the new anti-rhetorical expressionism managed to reinforce one another. The emphasis on sensation responsive to force helped break down large emotions into constituent units, and these units both required and rewarded experiments in form that could explore how the combinations of "feelings" established unique significant experiences. Rather than attribute authority to the contemplative poet, readers could attribute authority to how the poet as artificer managed to match the resources of language to these opportunities for new experiences. Pastoral traditions were the most visible victims of these new tastes. Their simplicity irritated poets eager to test their linguistic skills by rendering complex urban settings or intricate

psychological studies. And pastoral typified inherited forms which relied on rhetorical traditions that the work did not examine critically or contest imaginatively.

However, the principles establishing this sense of liberation were to create major problems for succeeding generations. Writing that successfully challenged the role played by rhetoric in poetry, and writing that successfully broke down the real into sensations that could be realigned imaginatively, both ran the risk of creating a significant gap between the ambitions driving the writers and the terms by which even most highly literate people lived their lives. Poetry could do without inherited rhetorical principles since it could revel in other imaginative modes of structuring sensations and exploring the powers of language. But the separation on which modernism thrived, between the authority of the art and the presumed and problematic authority of “sincere” artists, left it with almost no means to take up the traditional roles of delighting and instructing – at a time when an emerging economic depression made the lack of overt instruction seem irresponsible.

We need this hypothesis in order to explain why almost all the major modernists experienced substantial crises about their work and about their lives in the late 1920s and early 1930s. I think the sense of crisis stemmed primarily from their growing fears that the constructivist aesthetics on which they had come to rely made it impossible to develop sufficient frameworks for identifying with those suffering from social injustice. For if poetry is to have social force beyond an elite community, it may have to develop modes of presence that depend on the activity of a positioned speaking voice as it works its way through various possible identifications and identities. Constructivist aesthetics can develop a variety of voices and can make us keenly aware of the dangerous indulgences these voices elicit, but it cannot readily have these voices form and maintain sympathies and commitments directly pursuing improved social conditions.

I am not arguing that constructivist modernism lacked a sense of history or an empathy with social conditions produced by industrial capitalism. On the contrary, it might have had too rich, or at least too fine, a sense of history because it was obsessed by a compelling need not just to account for itself historically but to find from within history direct energies and patterns which might better equip individuals to deal with what seemed inescapable dark times. But constructivist

models of expression now seemed incompatible with the rhetorical stances necessary for convincing others that in fact something might be done to increase social justice. The modernists' distrust of concepts and of images, indeed their distrust of any medium not grounded in actual sensation, prevented any direct alignment of art with the sympathies necessary for social progress.

By the late 1930s the limitations I suggest were becoming increasingly obvious, and increasingly painful. So poets returned to seeking ways of dealing positively with the roles the imaginary plays in our lives. One large group of poets, typified by those publishing in *The Masses*, took the most direct path: they embraced rhetorical stances and tried overtly to provide images of just and noble behavior that a population might emulate. Those more sympathetic with modernism's critical sensibilities took a somewhat different tack. Many of the major innovations in American poetry from the late 1930s to the present were devoted to continuing modernism's reliance on objectified witnessing, but now as a witnessing that could bring the theatrical dimensions of the imaginary back into play while finessing its tendencies to sustain illusory subject positions.

This way of characterizing the historical situation enables us to honor what I think are major achievements by Wallace Stevens, George Oppen, Langston Hughes, and W. H. Auden. Each of these writers worked out distinctive ways of reintroducing the force of the imaginary identifications rhetoric fosters while using the resources of art to separate that force from the images and social roles whose authority is usually reinforced by our self-projections. Stevens tried to indulge the powers of the imaginary while orienting them toward the social on the level of process rather than on the level of images and roles. That is, he located sociality in learning to appreciate how we share investments that are grounded in the very ways we experienced their intensities. Oppen lacked Stevens' rhetorical flair, but he was a master at rendering complex situations that eliminate any possibility of self-congratulation. Hughes made realist concision a direct access to shared social investments. And Auden's deep distrust of vanity of all kinds led him eventually to a performative mode in which imaginary identities are replaced by a process of constantly testing whether one can take responsibility for the process of valuing established by poetic voice.

These poetic projects proved very influential on subsequent generations of American poets. Enormously indebted to Stevens for the

necessary resources, Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery both tried to emphasize an imagining that was not primarily oriented to figures of the substantial ego, while also resisting the tendencies in the most dominant critical voices of the time to have imagination sustain both truth claims and moral visions. (Ashbery can be seen as bringing Auden's performative voice into endlessly intricate combinations with the depersonalized theatricality of the Stevensian imagination.) And Hughes' and Oppen's version of fluid yet critical inhabiting of social fantasies lives on in the links between Objectivist poetics and Language Writing. Finally I shall address a group of poets who frankly but inventively make the case that writers have exhausted the possibilities in modernist styles. Frank O'Hara, Sylvia Plath, Robert Creeley, Adrienne Rich, and Robert Lowell remain part of my story because the sense of exhaustion requires them to engage the force of the imaginary in quite distinctive ways. Each of these poets returns to a version of the new realism, but they alter the role the imaginary plays in relation to that realism. This realism can no longer be opposed to the imaginary. The new new realism cannot be said to provide a world comprised mostly of sensations recombined by an impersonal art. Instead these poets regarded immediacy as already suffused with the kinds of ineffable desires that made interpretation necessary, and that frustrated any effort to form interpretive judgments in so crude a medium as language. Their images did not so much appeal to the eye as project the incompleteness of vision in a world inescapably permeated with desire and so requiring and frustrating interpretation. Impersonality seems now not an alternative to rhetoric but rhetoric by other means.

This story, unlike Perloff's, attends to every generation of modernist writing until the 1980s. Then, as MacGowan's book indirectly shows, there is simply not enough agreement on the major poets, so one is hard-pressed not to portray just a wide variety of promising beginnings. I have neither the space, the talent, nor the patient optimism required for that enterprise. I will have to be content with providing one potentially representative account of why one can be excited about carefully reading and thinking about works from four generations of American poets. If I am lucky, or if the writers are lucky, the examples they provide will also provide readers with terms which they can modify in order to establish critical paths for engaging contemporary work.

A final caveat. Because I have a large stake in the intellectual ferment to which modernist poetry was responding, I will spend considerable time outlining the concepts that seem to me crucial for understanding the writers' particular projects and for placing them in historical relation to one another. This attention to contexts will exact a considerable price. To engage contexts even on an introductory level I will have to ignore several quite substantial poetic careers. And even when I dwell on specific poems, I will have to ignore other important aspects of the poet's work. The best I can do to provide coverage of the field is to take a cue from those who do political surveys. I want to adapt the principle of "sampling." But my project will not involve taking the ideological pulse of a populace. Rather I shall propose certain works as significant for how they can quicken and hence modify aspects of such a pulse. Literary sampling involves two tasks. First, a critic must seek texts, usually but not always canonical ones, that best exemplify how authors typically stage their strengths, interests, commitments, and innovations. Second, the critic has to imagine not just how the texts matter for authors but how they can matter for readers. Sampling has to include demonstrating how readers might use poems to connect with what concerns them in their extra-literary experience. In effect, sampling tests conjunctions between literary ambitions and critical methods. But I hope readers will also be encouraged to engage the authors more fully so that my efforts at modeling become also measures of what is limited in the narrowly focused single perspective. An introductory book has to imagine its success as inseparable from its being superseded by the reader's developing ability to tell more complex stories.

The New Realism in Modernist Poetry: Pound and Williams

Nine out of every ten Americans have sold their souls for a quotation. They have wrapped themselves about a formula of words instead of about their own centers.

Ezra Pound, "Patria Mia"¹

Valid scientific thought consists in following as closely as may be the actual and entangled lines of force as they pulse through things.

Ernest Fenollosa, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry"²

Because the knife is polished they think it is sharp.

William Carlos Williams, The Embodiment of Knowledge³

I begin with what I am calling the "new realism" in order to track one of the major undervalued achievements by the first generation of modern American poets. This generation managed to establish significant ways of breaking from received ways of establishing "truth" by showing how poetry could be a substantial form of inquiry in its own right. But critics tend to emphasize the poets' formal innovations (as praise and, recently, as blame), without recognizing how concerns about content drive many of their innovations.⁴ In fact those formal innovations were inspired largely by late nineteenth-century science's treatments of the relation between mind and body, spirit and matter. I think it fair to say that very little of this transcendental speculative science has lasted. Yet, thanks to the fine work several critics have done in tracing these scientific arguments,⁵ we can see now that science at least had the effect of challenging rigid materialist causal models,

and so was quite influential in shaping the more fluid notions of matter and cause governing contemporary thinking. More important, we can begin to appreciate how the poets might have responded to the general intellectual ferment produced by those discoveries. Experiment was a general cultural ideal, not a mandarin excuse for evading historical struggles.

Obviously I cannot review all this work. But by concentrating on an ideal of a new realism I hope to bring out how the spirit of science generated both a sense of challenge and a sense of permission among modern poets. Given the fact that this book is a brief introduction, I can best honor that sense of challenge by going directly to examples of work that extend aspects of the new realism beyond science – in particular to the conceptual model provided by Henri Bergson's critiques of the Cartesian tradition and to the material model provided by Paul Cézanne's painting, with its own critiques of the habits of seeing characteristic of the old realism. Even with this narrowing of the field, we have to adjust for the fact that writers by and large do not read technical philosophy and do not look at paintings as art historians do. Therefore I shall focus only on how these ideas and these paintings sponsor new modes of self-consciousness about seeing and about sensing. This focus should suffice to show why the poets rejected representational models of writing and experimented with other, more direct means of bringing force and structure to what they could make seem immediate experience.

If one were limited to a single cultural avatar of the new realism, Henri Bergson would probably be the consensus choice. His ideas were widely disseminated in the United States and in Europe. T. S. Eliot went from Harvard University to Paris to hear the great man, and his translator in England was T. E. Hulme, someone close to the major modernist writers. Perhaps the most significant measure of his popularity was that Bertrand Russell thought it worth a small book to expose his errors. (Wyndham Lewis later wrote a much larger book with the same intent but not the same clarity.) Bergson matters for my purposes largely because he adapted the spirit of the new science into a critique of scientific method and so developed aspects of the new realism with which poets could immediately identify.⁶ Bergson knew his science – his early work was steeped in academic traditions in psychology – yet he insisted that only philosophy could provide sufficient critical scope to set the appropriate agendas for research.