

# **What Was Modernism?**

# Lecture 10: Modes of American Modernism

- 1) American Poetry
  - 2) William Carlos Williams
  - 3) Marianne Moore

1

## **1) American Poetry**

## 2) William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963)

*Poems* (1909)  
*The Tempers* (1913)  
*Al Que Quiere!* (1917)  
*Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920)  
*Spring and All* (1923)  
*In the American Grain* (1925)  
*Paterson* (1946-1958)  
*Desert Music* (1954)  
*Pictures from Brueghel* (1962)

[+ short stories (coll. in *The Farmer's Daughter* 1961), novels (*White Mule* 1937, *In the Money* 1940), *Autobiography* 1951]

### This is just to say

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

(1934)

### ***Spring and All (1923):***

There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here. Or rather, the whole world is between: Yesterday, tomorrow, Europe, Asia, Africa, – all things removed and impossible, the tower of the church at Seville, the Parthenon.

[...]

[N]early all writing, up to the present, if not all art, has been especially designed to keep up the barrier between sense and the vaporous fringe which distracts the attention from its agonized approaches to the moment. It has been always a search for ‘the beautiful illusion’. Very well. I am not in search of ‘the beautiful illusion’.

And if I pompously announce that I am addressed – To the imagination – you believe that I thus divorce myself from life and so defeat my own end, I reply: To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force – the imagination. This is its book. I myself invite you to read and to see.

In the imagination, we are from henceforth (as long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say, ‘I’ I mean also, ‘you’. And so, together, as one, we shall begin.

### **CHAPTER 19**

[...]

The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world.

[...]

### **[CHAPTER XIII ☙, CHAPTER VI]**

[...]

It is spring! but miracle of miracles a miraculous miracle has gradually taken place during these seemingly wasted eons. Through the orderly sequence of unmentionable time EVOLUTION HAS REPEATED ITSELF FROM THE BEGINNING.

Good God!

[...]

Yes, the imagination, drunk with prohibition, has destroyed and recreated everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was. Now indeed men look about in amazement at each other with a full realization of the meaning of ‘art’.

### **CHAPTER 2**

It is spring: life again begins to assume its normal appearance of ‘today’. Only the imagination is undeceived. The volcanoes are extinct. Coal is beginning to be dug again where the fern forests stood last night. (If an error is noted here, pay no attention to it.)

## CHAPTER XIX

I realize that the chapters are rather quick in their sequence and that nothing much is contained in any of them but no one should be surprised at this today.

[...]

It is spring. That is to say, it is approaching THE BEGINNING.

[...]

### I [“Spring and All”]

By the road to the contagious hospital  
under the surge of the blue  
mottled clouds driven from the

northeast – a cold wind. Beyond, the  
waste of broad, muddy fields  
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water  
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish  
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy  
stuff of bushes and small trees  
with dead, brown leaves under them  
leafless vines –

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish  
dazed spring approaches –

They enter the new world naked,  
cold, uncertain of all  
save that they enter. All about them  
the cold, familiar wind –

Now the grass, tomorrow  
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined –  
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of  
entrance – Still, the profound change

has come upon them: rooted they  
grip down and begin to awaken

[...]

## CHAPTER I

[...]

Meanwhile, SPRING, which has been approaching for several pages, is at last here.

[...]

What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from 'reality' – such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words.

[...]

## V ['The Black Winds']

[...]

How easy to slip  
into the old mode, how hard to  
cling firmly to the advance –

[...]

In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality.

[...]

## XV ['Light Becomes Darkness']

The decay of cathedrals  
is efflorescent  
through the phenomenal  
growth of movie houses

whose catholicity is  
progress since  
destruction and creation  
are simultaneous  
[...]

[P]rose has to do with the fact of an emotion; poetry has to do with the dynamization of emotion into a separate form. This is the force of the imagination.

prose: statement of facts concerning emotions, intellectual states, data of all sorts –  
technical expositions, jargon, of all sorts – fictional and other –  
poetry: new form dealt with as reality in itself.

[...]

## XXII ['The Red Wheelbarrow']

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens  
[...]

## *Pictures from Brueghel (1962)*

### X Children's Games

i

This is a scholyard  
crowded  
with children

of all ages near a village  
on a small stream  
meandering by

where some boys  
are swimming  
bare-ass

or climbing a tree in leaf  
everything  
is motion

elder women are looking  
after the small  
fry

a play wedding a  
christening  
nearby one leans

hollering  
into  
an empty hogshead

ii

[...] a

construction  
made of bricks  
some mason has abandoned.

iii

[...]  
Brueghel saw it all  
and with his grim

humor faithfully  
recorded  
it

### 3) Marianne Moore

(1887-1972)

poems published in the transatlantic little magazines  
(*The Egoist*, *Poetry*, *Others*) and in the magazine edited  
by herself from 1915 to 1929 (*The Dial*)  
*Observations* (1924)  
*Collected Poems* (1952)  
*Complete Poems* (1967)  
[+ essays]

## Poetry

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine.

(1919-1967: 29 lines > 3 lines)

**lost phrases:** ‘literalists of the imagination’ (ll. 21/22)  
‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’ (l. 24)

[...] In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,  
the raw material of poetry in  
all its rawness and  
that which is on the other hand  
genuine, you are interested in poetry.

## To a Snail

If ‘compression is the first grace of style,’  
you have it. Contractility is a virtue  
as modesty is a virtue.  
It is not the acquisition of any one thing  
that is able to adorn,  
or the incidental quality that occurs  
as a concomitant of something well said,  
that we value in style,  
but the principle that is hid:  
in the absence of feet, ‘a method of conclusions’;  
‘a knowledge of principles,’  
in the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn.

(1924)

### No Swan So Fine

'No water so still as the  
dead fountains of Versailles.' No swan,  
with swart blind look askance  
and gondoliering legs, so fine  
as the chintz china one with fawn-  
brown eyes and toothed gold  
collar on to show whose bird it was.

Lodged in the Louis Fifteenth  
candelabrum-tree of cockscomb-  
tinted buttons, dahlias,  
sea urchins, and everlasting,  
it perches on the branching foam  
of polished sculptured  
flowers – at ease and tall. The king is dead.  
(1932)

### The Steeple Jack

Dürer would have seen a reason for living  
in a town like this, with eight stranded whales  
to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into your house  
on a fine day, from water etched  
with waves as formal as the scales  
on a fish.

[...]

It could not be dangerous to be living  
in a town like this, of simple people,  
who have a steeple-jack placing danger signs by the church  
while he is gilding the solid-  
pointed star, which on a steeple  
stands for hope.

(1932)

## What Are Years?

What is our innocence,  
what is our guilt? All are  
naked, none is safe. And whence  
is courage: the unanswered question,  
the resolute doubt, -  
dumbly calling, deafly listening—that  
in misfortune, even death,  
encourages others  
and in its defeat, stirs

the soul to be strong? He  
sees deep and is glad, who  
accedes to mortality  
and in his imprisonment rises  
upon himself as  
the sea in a chasm, struggling to be  
free and unable to be,  
in its surrendering  
finds its continuing.

So he who strongly feels,  
behaves. The very bird,  
grown taller as he sings, steels  
his form straight up. Though he is captive,  
his mighty singing  
says, satisfaction is a lowly  
thing, how pure a thing is joy.  
This is mortality,  
this is eternity.

(1940)

## Bibliography Lecture 10:

- Gray, Richard, *American Poetry in the 20th Century*. London/New York: Longman, 1990.
- Holley, Margaret, *The Poetry of Marianne Moore: A Study in Voice and Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Lyon, Jean, "Comopolitanism and Modernism." In: Mark Wollaeger, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012: 387-412.
- Markos, Donald W., *Ideas in Things: The Poetry of William Carlos Williams*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1994.
- Nelson, Cary, ed., *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*. New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. Online Journal and Multimedia Companion:  
<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/>
- Pinsky, Robert, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*. New York: Farrar, 1999.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca L., *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006.