

What Was Modernism?

Lecture 10: Modes of American Modernism

1) American Poetry

2) William Carlos Williams

3) Marianne Moore

1) American Poetry

- poetry ↔ national identity → the prophetic voice
(vs. cosmopolitanism, cf. Walkowitz 2006, Lyon 2010)
- the American ideology:
opting out of society in order to construct a new one
- uselessness ↔ usefulness
aestheticism ↔ public presence
anxious questioning ↔ affirmation
(Poe, Dickinson) (Whitman, Emerson,
Longfellow)
- but:
fundamental alienation between poetry and reading public had begun earlier
(→ Romanticism)
- newness/immediacy easier to realize in American context

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 everlastings,
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)

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