

THE AURA OF MODERNISM

Marjorie Perloff

In a discussion of Walter Benjamin's famous "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproducibility," Andreas Huyssen writes:

In the context of social and cultural theory Benjamin conceptualized what Marcel Duchamp had already shown in 1919 in *L.H.O.O.Q.* By iconoclastically altering a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and . . . by exhibiting a mass-produced urinal as a fountain sculpture, Duchamp succeeded in destroying what Benjamin called the traditional art work's aura, that aura of authenticity and uniqueness that constituted the work's distance from life and that required contemplation and immersion on the part of the spectator.¹

Duchamp against auratic art? Against the unique art object? He certainly professed to be. But almost a century after Duchamp made *Fountain* and *L.H.O.O.Q.*, these readymades are enshrined in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in a room of their own, where pilgrims from around the world may be found in quiet contemplation of the artist's bold and unique conception. Indeed, the countless photographic reproductions, far from diminishing the aura of these originals, most of them not "originals" at all but Duchamp's own later copies, seem only to have enhanced it. Duchamp's readymades now command sky-high prices, and when I recently applied for permission to reproduce these and related images in a scholarly book on modernism, I was charged more than \$200 apiece.

Chronologically, Duchamp was, of course, an artist of the Modernist era, *Fountain* dating from 1917. As a Modernist, he was part of a larger movement that is now undergoing an astonishing revival. Duchamp exhibitions, conferences, websites, books, and articles are a boom industry.² But so is the "High" Modernism Duchamp ostensibly deconstructed in his experimental art. Consider the following events of 2003-04 alone:

(1) The Library of America published Ezra Pound's *Poems & Translations*, a volume of nearly 1400 pages that does not include the poet's central work, *The Cantos*, presumably because it will get a volume of its own. Its editor, Richard Sieburth, has also just brought out a superb annotated edition of *The Pisan Cantos* for New Directions. No longer, evidently, will a *Selected Cantos* do; the *Pisans*, it is assumed, must and will be read whole in courses as well as by Pound readers at large.

(2) *The Cambridge Edition of the Letters and Works of D.H. Lawrence*, now running to some forty volumes, has published a 700-page edition of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, that supplements the short 1923 text most of us first read in a small Viking paperback. The Cambridge edition includes all the earlier versions of *Studies*, drafts, and very full notes and introductory material.

(3) The second volume of R. N. Foster's magisterial biography of W. B. Yeats was published by Oxford, receiving many reviews like the following by John Banville in the *New York Review of Books*: "*W. B. Yeats: A Life* is a great and important work, a triumph of scholarship, thought, and empathy such as one would hardly have thought possible in this age of disillusion. It is an achievement wholly of a scale with its heroic subject."³

(4) Gertrude Stein's writings, long considered too eccentric and incomprehensible to discuss in detail, are the subject of Ulla Dydo's 600-page study *The Language that Rises* (Northwestern), which examines "the process of making and remaking of Stein's texts as they move from notepad to notebook to manuscript," focusing on the single decade (1923-34). Dydo's book lays to rest, once and for all, the myth, recently regurgitated in Janet Malcolm's long *New Yorker* profile,⁴ that Stein's colorful persona deserves discussion but that, with the exception of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and one or two other prose texts, the work itself is unreadable.

(5) The University of Connecticut organized a large conference called “Celebrating Wallace Stevens” to be held in April 2004 and including poets as well as academics. A call for papers to supplement those by invited speakers produced, according to the organizer, Glen MacLeod, hundred of submissions from eager young Modernists.

(6) Joseph Roth’s *The Radetsky March* (1932), newly translated by Joachim Neugroschel for Overlook Press in 2002, has become, after decades of neglect, something of a best-seller. In *The New Yorker* (19 January 2004, 81-86), Joan Acocella devoted a large portion of her essay “Rediscovering Joseph Roth” to this great novel on the decline of the Hapsburg empire, as seen through the eyes of its military, stationed in the small garrison border towns on the Eastern frontier. What makes Roth’s so unusual – and no doubt accounts for his earlier neglect – is that this Jewish writer from Galicia was a fervent admirer of the monarchy, indeed of the Emperor Franz Joseph.

(7) In 2003, Viking published Lydia Davis’s new translation of *Du Côté de chez Swann*, with the remaining volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu* to come in translations by different authors. Widely reviewed in newspapers and magazines, this, perhaps the most difficult of Modernist novels, is evidently selling astonishingly well to what is largely a new audience. In *Search of Lost Time*, or *Remembrance of Things Past* as it was called in the Scott Moncrieff translation, is the subject of sixty-nine customer reviews on amazon.com, of which more later.

(8) The journal *Modernism/Modernity*, now in its tenth year of publication, won this year’s Phoenix Award for significant editorial achievement. *M/M* is the official journal of the Modernist Studies Association (MSA), which held its first annual convention in 1999 and is now a major fixture on the conference scene, having grown so large it can hardly accommodate all those who wish to attend its meeting and give papers. In 2003, the MSA put out a call for papers for a special double issue on a topic that would have been declared reactionary a mere decade ago – namely the poetry and prose of T. S. Eliot.

These are just random examples of Modernist activity on the academic and publishing front today. It can be argued, of course, that the great artists of the early century never disappeared, that what we are witnessing today is more accurately survival rather than revival. Throughout the past century, there have always been scholars, poets, and even general readers committed to Yeats and Eliot, Pound and Stevens, Proust and Lawrence, and who were passionate about the avant-garde as represented by Duchamp or Stein. But the fact is that from the 1960s well into the 90s, the word *Modernism* was a term of opprobrium, even as the *avant-garde* was pronounced a failure, given its inability, so Peter Bürger famously told us, to destroy “art” as a bourgeois institution. The critique of Modernism, for that matter, came not only from the Left that questioned its elitist, patriarchal, imperialist, and colonialist tendencies, but could be found in such bourgeois venues as *The New Yorker*, where Cynthia Ozick first published her scathing piece on T. S. Eliot. “We no longer live,” Ozick declared, “in the literary shadow” of Eliot, whom she dismissed as so much “false coinage” – an “autocratic, inhibited, depressed, rather narrow-minded, and considerably bigoted fake Englishman.” “High art,” moreover, “is dead. The passion for inheritance is dead. Tradition is equated with obscurantism. The wall that divided serious high culture from the popular arts is breached.” In this context, “Eliot’s elegiac fragments appear too arcane, too aristocratic, and too difficult for contemporary ambition.”⁵

This essay appeared in 1989, a mere fifteen years ago. Extreme as Ozick’s argument may seem today, its reservations about Eliot’s politics were voiced as early as 1967 by a critic who had himself written sympathetically on Eliot and edited his critical prose. I am thinking of Frank Kermode, who observed, in *The Sense of an Ending*, that there was a “correlation between early modernist literature and authoritarian politics,” that “totalitarian theories of form,” which he found in such key texts as Yeats’s *A Vision*, Eliot’s critical essays, and everywhere in Pound’s writings, were “matched or reflected by a totalitarian politics”:

It appears in fact, that modernist radicalism in art—the breaking down of pseudo-traditions, the making new of a true understanding of the nature of the elements of art—this radicalism involves the creation of fictions which may be dangerous in the dispositions they breed towards the world. . . . Instead of [a commonplace view of reality]

there is to be order as the modernist artist understands it: rigid, out of flux, the spatial order of the modern critic or the closed authoritarian society. . . .⁶

And Kermode singled out Eliot as the most extreme case of this authoritarianism:

He had a persistent nostalgia for closed, immobile hierarchical societies. If tradition is, as he said in *After Strange Gods* . . . 'the habitual actions, habits and customs' which represent the kinship 'of the same people living in the same place' [shades of Bloom's ineffectual definition of a nation in *Ulysses*!] it is clear that Jews do not have it, but also that practically nobody now does (112).

This is certainly an accurate appraisal of *After Strange Gods*, the set of University of Virginia lectures Eliot published in 1934 (and then suppressed), but Kermode makes two assumptions that now seem questionable. First, his "Modernism" here refers to the later 1930s; indeed, "Early Modernism" is Kermode's term for the pre-World War II period as distinct from what he calls the "schismatic modernism" of the postwar era. But from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we may note, as have recent critics like Tyrus Miller and Peter Nicholls, that Modernism was a phenomenon of the early century – indeed Nicholls follows Benjamin in taking the Modernist ethos back to the mid-nineteenth century of Baudelaire.⁷ The totalitarianisms of the thirties – Communism as well as Fascism – worked to undermine the very foundations of Modernism, as we can see most clearly in the Soviet rejection of its own avant-garde, emblemized dramatically by the suicide of Mayakovsky in 1930.

Periodization is, of course, always open to debate, but what about Kermode's other unstated assumption, which is that the "totalitarian" politics of much Anglo-American Modernist writing was matched by "totalitarian" form – the "rigid . . . spatial order" of a "closed authoritarian society"? Do such strictures apply to the paratactic collage structure of Pound's *Cantos*? To the free-wheeling performative mode of Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*? To the non-linear narratives of Stein's *Tender Buttons* or *Stanzas in Meditation*? To the pseudo-closure of *The Waste Land*'s final line, "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih," which succeeds only in reopening the larger question of what it might mean to fish "with the arid plain behind me"?

These are questions that seem vital enough to readers of Modernist texts today. But in the antinomian climate of the 1960s, Kermode's association of Modernism with reaction, authoritarianism, and proto-Fascism found a sympathetic audience. The rescue operation performed by Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) had not yet begun; indeed, in the English-speaking world, the reception of this important text did not begin properly until at least 1984, when the first English translation of the book was published by Routledge.⁸ For Adorno, Modernist art is characterized by its *resistance* to capitalist commodification, a resistance characterized by its opposition to a society that it nevertheless brings back into the artwork by means of indirect critique. The true Modernist artwork, Adorno posits, refuses to engage in direct *reflection* of social surface; it does not "want to duplicate the façade of reality," but "makes an uncompromising reprint of reality while at the same time avoiding being contaminated by it." This dialectic process is characterized by Adorno as *negative mimesis*. Kafka's work, for example, is great in its "negative sense of reality"; his image of bureaucracy is "the cryptogram of capitalism's highly polished, glittering late phase, which he excludes in order to define it all the more precisely in its negative."⁹ Accordingly, fragmentation, dislocation, and difficulty are essential to Modernist art, which rigidly excludes the banalities of everyday life and rejects the specious productions of mass culture.

Marxist critics as dissimilar as Andreas Huyssen and Fredric Jameson have built on Adorno's theory even as they have rejected its purism, its repudiation of all but self-evidently "high" art into the Modernist canon so that even jazz has been dismissed as merely populist. In *After the Great Divide* (1986), Huyssen takes as his starting point Adorno's characterization of Modernism as insisting on "the autonomy of the art work, its obsessive hostility to mass culture, its radical separation from the culture of everyday life, and its programmatic distance from political, economic, social concerns." But whereas Adorno considers such distance inevitable, Huyssen argues that the task of postmodernism has been precisely to challenge the "Great Divide" between

high art and mass culture. Examining a variety of postmodern art discourses, Huyssen notes that “The pedestal of high art and high culture no longer occupies the privileged space it used to. . . . Despite all its noble aspirations and achievements, we have come to recognize that the culture of enlightened modernity has also always (though by no means exclusively) been a culture of inner and outer imperialism” – an imperialism that no longer goes unchallenged. “Whether these challenges,” Huyssen concludes, “will usher in a more habitable, less violent and more democratic world remains to be seen” (218-19).

Fredric Jameson’s critique of Adorno’s aesthetics is even more pessimistic. For Jameson, Modernist *resistance* cannot, as Adorno posits, overcome the terrible alienation that defines the Modernist moment. The increasing commodification of social relations, the degradation of language at the hands of advertising, the impersonality and anonymity of modern bureaucracy—these create a literature that is increasingly embattled. The battle cry “Make It New!”, in this context, is no more than a doomed effort to resist capitalist reification. The dislocation of modernist narrative, moreover, can be understood as a denial of historical change. Postmodernism, which represents an even further stage of what is now global capitalism, cannot improve this state of affairs, but at least its admission that depth has given way to surface, parody to pastiche, emotion to a new blank affect, a centered discourse to one that is wholly decentered, exposes the limitations of Modernism. Indeed, the seemingly “realist” fiction of emerging nations, old-fashioned as it may look to those with Modernist blinkers, manifests an authenticity lost in the Western World – an authenticity that comes from its allegorical treatment of its respective culture.¹⁰

Accordingly, so Jameson argues in the famous “Postmodernism” essay, “the high-modernist conception of a unique style, along with the accompanying collective ideals of an artistic or political vanguard or avant-garde, themselves stand or fall along with that older notion (or experience) of the so-called centered subject.”¹¹ And there is much talk, in the pages that follow, of the demise of the bourgeois ego, of the distinctive brush stroke, of “a self present to do the feeling” (15). Modernism, it seems, can no longer speak to us. Thus, in his “Conclusion,” Jameson raises questions like “Is T. S. Eliot recuperable?” or “What ever happened to Thomas Mann and Andre Gide?” “Frank Lentricchia,” he posits, “has kept Wallace Stevens alive throughout this momentous climatological transformation, but Paul Valéry has vanished without a trace, and he was central to the modernist movement internationally” (303). Indeed, the “great modernist works” have “become reified . . . by becoming school classics. Their distance from their readers as monuments and as the efforts of ‘genius’ tended also to paralyze form production in general, to endow the practice of all the high-cultural arts with an alienating specialist or expert qualification that blocked the creative mind with awkward self-consciousness and intimidated fresh production” (317).

This was written, or rather published, in 1991, a short thirteen years ago. All the more astonishing, therefore, how fully Jameson’s theory of Modernism has lost ground. More recent cultural critics like Michael North, Jennifer Wicke, and Carrie Noland have been at pains to show that far from excluding all popular culture and the realm of everyday life, the “great” modernist works like *Ulysses* or avant-garde poems like Blaise Cendrars’s “Prose du Transsibérien” were permeated with the language of advertising and commerce, that the “great divide,” at any rate, was always more apparent than real.¹² In *Reading 1922*, North concludes that “Beginning with Wittgenstein,” whose *Tractatus* was published in England in 1922 along with *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, “the notion that truth is local and particular came into being as a reflex of the attempt to make it global and universal” (213). Modernism, by this argument, was never accurately characterized by the autonomy and elitism attributed to it; it was always thoroughly contaminated by its rapprochement with the discourses of everyday life.

Such reconsideration of Modernist texts – indeed, the whole complex discourse about the relation of twentieth-century art to mass culture – has done much to prompt a lively new discussion of Modernism in academic venues and scholarly journals. But the revival of Modernism has also been promoted by another, and rather more unlikely, quarter: namely, the broader English-speaking public that communicates on the internet, particularly in such places as the Customer Review columns of amazon.com. “Customer reviewers,” who may or may not give their names, in whole or in part, but do provide their locations – for example, “Adriana from Vigna del

Mar, Chile" or "Tepi from Kyoto, Japan," or "A reader from San Francisco" – and must have verifiable (though unpublished) email addresses – come from all over the world and remain largely anonymous with respect to age, race, business or profession, social class, and often, as in the case of "Tepi" above, even gender. They need not purchase the book in question and receive no reward other than that of finding their statements, ranging from a single sentence to a page or two, reproduced online, together with their rankings: from five stars (the top) to a mere one. What motivates customer reviewers, it would seem, is the invitation to make their voices and rankings heard by others. Judging from their frequently faulty grammar and spelling, they are not likely to be professionals or even students, although they are generally well informed and highly literate.¹³ Rather, they represent a situation Walter Benjamin anticipated when he remarked wistfully that, in the age of mechanical reproducibility, "at any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer":

It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for 'letters to the editor.' And today there is hardly a gainfully occupied European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports. . . . Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. (*Work of Art*, 232).

These words have proved to be remarkably prophetic. When Jameson asks "Is Eliot recuperable?" he is referring to the academic consensus of the 1980s and 90s, when the very intimation of anti-Semitism, racism, or colonialism was enough to keep a given author out of the literature classroom. But there are signs that this consensus is breaking down. In 1998, Signet Books published a mass market paperback of *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, with an introduction by Helen Vendler; in 2000, Norton published the Norton Critical Edition of *The Waste Land*, edited by Michael North. Together, these two editions have received about 30 customer reviews, almost all of them granting Eliot five stars, from which I quote the following:

What the thunder said, April 9, 2001

Reviewer: [cailleachx](#) from GA USA T.S. Eliot wrote "The Waste Land" against the backdrop of a world gone mad-- searching for reason inside chaos, and striving to build an ark of words by which future generations could learn what had gone before, T.S. Eliot explores that greatest of human melancholy-- disillusionment. This is a difficult poem, but one well-worth exploring to its fullest. The inherent rhythms of Eliot's speech, the delightful, though sometimes obscure, allusions, and intricate word-craft, create an atmosphere of civilization on the edge-- in danger of forgetting its past, and therefore repeating it. In the end, only the poet is left, to admonish the world to peace, to preserve the ruins of the old life, and to ensure that future generations benefit from the disillusionments of the past. . . .

Buy this. You won't regret it. If you're an Eliot fan, you probably have it anyway. If you're not, you will be when you put it down.

Search for your Soul, May 12, 2003

Reviewer: [Angelo Ventura](#) from Brescia, Lombardia Italy He's the one and only poet of modern man's soul. All modern literature owes to him. Not only this, but he had great imagination and a wry sense of humour. Among his "minor" works sonnets like "The hippopotamus" is worth a poem of some modern writer. Read him to inspire your mind!

What it takes to write the greatest poem of the 20th century, December 20, 2001

Reviewer: [iburiedpaul](#) from Clearwater, FL USA Simply put, THE WASTE LAND is one of the strangest, most complicated, and interesting poems ever written. Try reading an unannotated version of the poem and you will see why even TS Eliot scholars need a little help with some of the images and literary references Eliot uses. This NORTON CRITICAL EDITION of THE WASTE LAND is an essential book for any Eliot fan, new or old. It provides you with practically every single piece of literature, history, and music that inspired Eliot to write his manifesto of the Lost Generation. If you have any questions concerning THE

WASTE LAND, this is the book you need...this is the book you want. Buy it and realize how well-read you are not.

Great Poem, Great Edition, January 11, 2004

Reviewer: **Erik Tennyson** from Philadelphia, PA USA

Simply stated, the poem is one the true benchmarks for twentieth century literature. It is rather difficult in that it is highly allusive, some allusions fall on the rather obscure side (Middleton, Weston) but mostly they are rather well known (Augustine, Dante, the Bible, Baudelaire, Wagner). The experience will prove to be as didactic as well as expressive due to all these allusions in the text. As far as the poem itself goes, it has a definite effect on you when you read it. I remember the first time I read the lines, "I think we are in rats' alley where the dead men lost their bones," and although I couldn't really understand what was going on just yet in the poem, that line as well as many other lines and images, had an affect on me. On the whole the emotional tone of the poem (not to do it injustice and say what it is about) is the spiritual alienation and degradation everyone felt after WWI. It's a quest of sorts, taken on by a persona of Eliot to find meaning amidst "the stony rubbish" that is the world. It sets the philosophy of Buddha and Augustine side by side as it does with the Rig Veda and the Bible in a collage of different voices and arresting images.

I suppose Jameson might respond that these customer reviews testify to the thorough commodification of *The Waste Land*, what with their naïve enthusiasm and assessment of Eliot's subject matter. But I would argue that this sheer enthusiasm, on the part of non-academic readers who have nothing to gain from writing their commentaries tells us something very different. When Erik Tennyson, for example, talks of the amazing emotional high he received from the lines, "I think we are in rat's alley / where the dead men lost their bones," he is saying, however naively, that poetry is first of all a use of sound and language. At the same time, all the readers of North's Norton Critical Edition testify to *wanting to know more about* this poem they already love.

North himself posits in *Reading 1922* that *The Waste Land* shares a discourse radius with any number of other works produced in the same year – works in different genres like Anzia Yezierska's Jewish immigrant novel *Salome of the Tenements* or Walter Lippmann's essay *Public Opinion*. This is true if we are reading *The Waste Land* as an index to the culture and ideology that produced it. But why do readers today, whose knowledge of and interest in post-World War I London as seen through the eyes of an American expatriate, are likely to be minimal, readers who, by their own admission, have never heard of most of the authors alluded to in *The Waste Land*, continue to find the poem so fascinating? It seems that what readers look for is not the poem's political unconscious but the charm of its distinctive rhythm and its deployment of a language that is somehow extraordinary. It must, in short, *give pleasure*.

Take the case of the American Communist poet Edwin Rolfe (1909-54), who is allotted twelve pages in Cary Nelson's *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (Oxford, 2000) and receives thorough treatment on the website that accompanies the volume.¹⁴ Rolfe's *Trees Become Torches: Selected Poems*, published in the American Poetry Recovery Series at the University of Illinois Press in 1994, followed by the *Collected Poems* in 1997, must now be special-ordered on amazon.com because its sales rank is too low. For Nelson and his fellow editors, Rolfe's political poems, especially those prompted by the Spanish Civil War and later by McCarthyism are important as fiery denunciations of capitalism and class stratification. But radical politics per se evidently has little appeal to the internet poetry audience. The Rolfe volumes have not prompted a single customer review, whereas this poet's exact contemporary George Oppen, himself a Communist in the pre-World War II years, receives comments like the following:

Neglected Classic, March 31, 2000 [review of the *Collected Poems*, New Directions, 1976]

Reviewer: **Aaron Peck** from Vancouver, BC. Oppen is by far the most underrated poetic genius of the twentieth century. I know that sounds bold, but I think for the most part his work has been suppressed because of his un-apologetic affiliations with the communist party. His work, however, is not concerned with politics: it is some of the most honest, personal and striking poetry I've read in this language. His long poem "Of Being Numerous" is the greatest

example: "Obsessed, bewildered / by the shipwreck / of the singular / we have chosen the meaning / of being numerous." Oppen is the great, forgotten elegist of the postwar era. These poems are, in a sense, about failure, about loss and how we perceive and react to the world. This book is not to be missed as it far too often is.

1969 Pulitzer Prize winner, December 5, 2000 (review of *This in Which*, New Directions, 1965)

Reviewer: [elljay](#) from Los Angeles I don't know much about George Oppen – except to note in passing that he was among those victimized by the anti-Communist hysteria of the '50s – but he has just become one of my favorite poets for having produced this sleek little volume. The poems here are extremely terse and rock-like; every word is carefully chosen; and the result is verse of uncommon force and directness. Not many poets can say so much with so little (from the title poem): "You are the last/Who will know him/Nurse//Not know him,/He is an old man,/A patient,/How could one know him?//You are the last/Who will see him/Or touch him,/Nurse." If you're like me and have had your share of "chatty" or self-consciously clever wordsmiths, this is strong stuff. (As he writes elsewhere: "I have not and never did have any motive of poetry/But to achieve clarity.") Oppen's chilly, Spartan poetry sounds like it should be chiseled in stone, and he can be winning even when he departs from form, as proven by the prose sections in "Route." It's intense, haunting, and truly memorable (and I mean this last adjective literally: I can remember this stuff after I've put the book down, whereas most poetry disintegrates in my head almost instantly). This is the real thing, people, and you owe it to yourself to find a copy. – *This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title*

What makes these Oppen reviews, written before the 2002 publication of Michael Davidson's *New Collected Poems*, remarkable is that the "customers" in question are calling attention to long since published or out of print books of poems – books that are here praised for their language, the integrity of their form, and their creation of a distinctive lyric speaker.

Amazon reviewers, in other words, instinctively look for works that strike them as *unique* – that have what Benjamin called *aura*. The response to Gertrude Stein is especially interesting in this regard. For the past decade or so, academic criticism has emphasized Stein's representativeness: Stein the feminist (e.g. Harriet Chessman), the lesbian writer (Judy Grahn), expatriate (Shari Benstock), American immigrant (Priscilla Wald), trained scientist (Steven Meyer), collector-consumer (Michael Davidson), Jew (Maria Damon) – most recently, in Janet Malcolm's *New Yorker* profile, Stein the proto-Fascist who wrote speeches for Marshall Pétain and protected the politically suspect Bernard Faÿ.¹⁵ All these studies provide valuable insights into Stein's work, but they also make apparent that hers is work that never quite fits the proposed category: in the Oxford *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, for example, Nelson includes a single Stein work, "Patriarchal Poetry" so as to bring her into the feminist fold, but this long, linguistically dislocated poem can hardly live up to its fighting title.

The one thing that Stein inevitably *was*, however, both chronologically and geographically (an American in Paris) was a Modernist. Ulla Dydo's *The Language that Rises*, which documents Stein's process of revision, her obsessive care for *le mot juste*, the "right" sentence, and the perfection of composition and formal structure, allies this Jamesian (both Henry and William were central influences) writer to such otherwise uncongential Modernists as Eliot and Pound. The amazon.com reviewers seem to recognize this. The mass-market Dover edition (1997) of *Tender Buttons*, for example, elicited eight reviews, of which I quote four:

Modernist Classic That's Fun to Read, October 9, 2002

Reviewer: **michael helsem** from Dallas, TX United States The playfulness & intellectual rigor of the best of the Modernist movement unite in this small book of exquisite prose poems that may be read, on one level at least, as an extended allegory of eroticism (e.g. "tender buttons" are nipples); & on another, as a manifesto of what was to become L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. But you don't really need to be a scholar to appreciate the freshness & lovely rhythms of the poems. They are like nothing else that existed at the time they were written (not even the

great Victorian "nonsense" poets dared to be this non-referential) & though they have cast a long shadow across late 20c. PoMo, there really has been nothing quite like them since.

Sui Generis, January 17, 2002

Reviewer: [mikh](#) from Ardmore, PA United States I gave this book to my six-year-old nephew when he was starting to read. BOY did he get annoyed- but he kept coming back to it. "These are not poems!" he would sputter. While *Finnegans Wake* is supposed to be difficult to comprehend, one can "diagram" Joyce's sentences- the "grammar" is "normative," only the words are peculiar. With Stein, the words themselves are "normal," even banal, but the sentences are more Out There than a Zen Koan. Anyway, as the late lamented Beatle George supposedly said about a painting, "it's either groovy or it isn't." *Tender Buttons* is.

Endlessly rereadable; the best prose poem of all time, October 22, 1999

Reviewer: **A reader** from Portland, OR United States I don't have as much patience as some with Stein's other work, but "*Tender Buttons*" is sublime. It leads the mind down paths it would never otherwise follow. I'm basically a philistine, and a populist, but this book never loses its splendour. Here (and here only, for me) Gertrude Stein had perfect pitch.

Pure utter geniusness., March 19, 2000

Reviewer: [Pauline](#) from Brussels, Belgium My random poems have been said to be Stein-like. Now that I know more about G.S., a poem was inspired by her...

"Gertrude Stein Poeme O'Mijn":

Images realize aspects throughout. Painting daunting solid reasonable feisty planes of aura felt. Pangs of fluid energy suffer thought. Remaining understood eras feel wrought over and through. Satisfied mental strain tally connective ways again. Palled sorts of slews o'mirage onslaught on papyrus.

Zen Koan, perfect pitch, freshness, lovely rhythms, and, as Pauline from Brussels puts it in her Stein poem, "feisty planes of aura felt." Let me now return to that "aura felt" and try to sketch in why I think Modernism exerts such power over us today.

News that STAYS News

"Poetry," Pound famously declared in the *ABC of Reading*, "is news that STAYS news."¹⁶ It is a sobering reminder in the age of cell phones, email, blogs, and countless websites that make demands on our daily attention. Nothing seems to last more than a split second, even the appearances of our favorite poets and artists. We spot an Ashbery poem in *TLS* or *The New York Review of Books*; we tell ourselves we'll catch it later when we have more time. and that, in any case, it will surely appear in the poet's next collection. But such "delay" is tricky, for by then, it may be a somewhat different poem. In a recent essay, already in proof, I cited two new poetic texts by the British multimedia poet Caroline Bergvall, only to have the poet send me a newer version of the manuscript, whose changes I wish I could have incorporated in my citations.

Change, it would seem, is all, and those who succeed are those willing to reinvent themselves gracefully. As little as two decades ago, when theorists like Michel Foucault or Paul De Man were holding sway, a given position could be counted on to have a life-span of at least six or seven years – roughly the time it took to complete one's Ph.D. Today, there is no such continuity: those, for example, who "did" American Studies a decade ago when it was fashionable to produce books with titles like *Constituting Americans* (Priscilla Wald's 1995 book, which I cited in connection with Stein above), have now moved on to globalization studies where Americans are now "constituted" in terms of a very different picture, and literary texts have become expendable.

Interdisciplinarity, the watchword of the moment, often means *non* rather than *inter*. Consider our current political paradigm where the worst thing one can say about any Presidential candidate is that he is an "insider," as if training – in political history and theory, constitutional law, economics, and just plain political practice – means nothing. So the body builder turned film-star

and producer Arnold Schwarzenegger and the physician Howard Dean boast that at least they're not "insiders" like Gray Davis or John Kerry. The reverse is also the case: I recently read that Gray Davis is now acting in a film comedy, and although I don't know of any politicians who have become physicians overnight, I predict this too will happen. Certainly, Richard Dysart, who played the avuncular senior partner in the TV series *L.A. Law*, is known for the astute legal commentary he dispenses at cocktail parties.

Again, no one seems to think it odd that Slavoj Žižek would produce a new reading of Christianity (*The Puppet and the Dwarf*, MIT Press, 2003) or that Giovanna Borradori's interviews with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, on the occasion of 9/11, would generate a book called *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Chicago, 2003). What, one wonders, is the staying power of such books? Are they designed to be read five years from now? And if not, what is the difference between "philosophy" in the Habermas-Derrida title and journalism?

The situation in scholarship is not entirely different. Consider Jerome McGann's encyclopedic and brilliantly produced Dante Gabriel Rossetti hypertext archive, copyrighted in 1993 in its first incarnation and constructed in stages, the most recent installment dating from 2000. The archive will soon need extensive reconstruction so as to be up to date as well as easier to access. But even as this project is launched, a nagging question arises: how many English departments at the present moment offer a course in Victorian Poetry, much less the Pre-Raphaelites? How many Art History departments? And how, in turn, will the Archive be able to create its audience rather than respond to an existing one?

In this climate, the traditional genres – poem, painting, novel – inevitably take a back seat to such intentionally transient art forms as performance, installation, sound sculpture, and what I have called elsewhere "differential" text – which is to say a "text" that exists in various incarnations – say, print, digital, and art gallery display.¹⁷ A Robert Smithson earthwork like the *Spiral Jetty* or a Fluxus performance like George Brecht's famed *Keyhole Event* – these are now known, not in their original form, but through extensive documentation, photographic reproduction, and retrospective exhibition. And "poems" like those collected in David Antin's *Talking at the Boundaries* (1976) are known to younger audiences primarily through tape recordings, available in the various poetry sound archives. An important intermedia artist like the Swedish Oyvind Fahlström, whose radio plays of the sixties are only now getting the attention they deserve, is known to English-speaking readers mainly through such scholarly texts as Teddy Hultberg's *Manipulating the World* (1999), which contains the complete text of *Birds in Sweden* and *The Holy Torsten Nilsson*, together with CDs, synopses, critical analyses, and the Concrete poetry versions of specific radio dialogues. "Reading" thus increasingly gives way to a complex interactive process, involving various technologies.

It is in this context that Modernism casts such a long shadow. For even as contemporary texts enjoy an inevitable precariousness, the great texts of the early century are very much *there*, showing no signs of going away. Indeed, all present indicators suggest that a hundred years from now, people will still be reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's *The Trial*, Mann's *Death in Venice*, even as museums, or whatever large exhibition spaces will be called a hundred years from now, will still be showing Malevich's paintings and Duchamp's readymades. The question is why.

Once, when I was talking to John Cage, I mentioned that I didn't know how to approach the procedural texts of Jackson Mac Low, that I didn't quite get their point. "Oh," Cage laughed. "Forget about their quality. Think of their quantity!" Nonsensical as this quip sounds, it says something important about the Modernists. Theirs was the first – and perhaps the last – generation that combined a long life span and the production of voluminous works with the faith that, to cite Pound again, "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree," that "poetry . . . is the most concentrated form of verbal expression" (*ABCR* 28, 36).

This is an unusual combination. Victorian careers also tended to be long and produced great quantities of poetry and prose, but no one would pretend that Tennyson (1809-92) or Browning (1812-89) had loaded every rift with ore, to quote Keats who himself died at the age of twenty-two. But the Modernists took very seriously Keats's pronouncement that "The excellence of every art is in its intensity." "It is all speech," Yeats once praised a poem by his friend Dorothy Welleseley, "carried to its highest by intensity of sound and meaning," and he describes the

“Daemonic Man” of Phase 17 in *A Vision* (Yeats’s own phase), as one who “seeks to deliver simplification through intensity, modified by simplicity.”¹⁸ “Use no superfluous word,” wrote Pound, “no adjective which does not reveal something,” and again, this time with the Victorians and Edwardians squarely in mind, “Don’t use such an expression as ‘dim lands of *peace*.’ It dulls the image.”¹⁹ “Dichten,” = condensare” (ABC 36).

Except for Hart Crane, who committed suicide when he was thirty-three, the major American Modernist poets had long careers: Robert Frost lived to be 84, Gertrude Stein 72, Wallace Stevens 76, William Carlos Williams, 75, Ezra Pound 87, H.D. 75, Marianne Moore 85, T. S. Eliot 77. All of the above produced volume after volume of poetry – but unlike so many of their post-modern successors, the modernists were prolific in other forms of writing as well. They were dramatists (Stein, Williams, Pound, Eliot), fiction writers (Stein, Williams, H.D.), critics (all of the above but especially Eliot and Pound), autobiographers (Stein, Williams, H.D.), translators, editors, essayists, and often, as in the case of such British modernists as Yeats, Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf, brilliant letter writers. Indeed, however complicated their love lives or, for Yeats and Pound, their misguided political actions, it is fair to say that writing is what these writers lived for. And not just topical writing but the production of “news that STAYS news.” Writing, by this account, inevitably involved contradiction as well as complexity: Yeats especially, but also the very different Williams used poetry as the site where contradictory views and emotions could be resolved – but only momentarily, making way for the production of the next poem. Density, in this scheme of things, is all.

It is no coincidence, surely, that Wittgenstein, himself by no means sympathetic to his literary contemporaries in Britain, remarked in one of his *Zettel*, “Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.”²⁰ Nor is it a coincidence that the great Russian Modernist theorist Roman Jakobson, who began his career as a Futurist poet named Aljagrov and wrote his first book on the avant-garde poet Velimir Khlebnikov, insisted on the distinction between the poetic and the referential functions of language – a distinction that has, of course, come under heavy fire from contemporary critics like Stanley Fish – critics who have “proved” that one cannot pinpoint a hard-and-fast difference between, say, the language of journalism and the language of poetry. But if there cannot and should not be a quantitative measure for such differentiation, any more than there is a “great divide” between high and low art, common sense – and this is where Pound is such a central poetician – tells us that “writing” that does not “stay news” is quickly expendable and replaceable by other writing. Only poetry, as he frequently put it, endures.

Gertrude Stein, as I have argued elsewhere, held similar views.²¹ In “What are Master-Pieces” (1935), she distinguishes between talking and writing, the former necessary for the creation of *identity*, the latter an act of *creation*. And she declares:

After all there is always the same subject there are the things you see and there are human beings and animal beings and everybody you might say since the beginning of time knows practically commencing at the beginning and going to the end everything about these things . . . it is not this knowledge that makes master-pieces. Not at all not at all at all.²²

Art, for Stein, has nothing to do with subject matter or psychology. How Hamlet reacts to his father’s ghost, for instance, has nothing to do with the nature of value of *Hamlet* the play, “That would be something anyone in any village would know they could talk about it endlessly but that would not make a master-piece.” And the same holds true for painting: “A picture exists for and in itself and the painter has to use objects landscapes and people as a way the only way that he is able to get the picture to exist” (357).

Here is the demand for autonomy regularly attributed to such High Modernists as Eliot and Pound but rarely to an avant-gardist like Stein. “The poet,” Thornton Wilder recalls her saying, “has to work in the excitingness of pure being: he [*sic*] has to get back that intensity into language.” There’s that word *intensity* again, and Stein always coupled intensity with the notion of *work*, as when, in “Picasso,” she characterizes the painter as “one who was always working” whereas “others” were “following” him. And as Wilder further recalls:

Miss Stein once said: Every masterpiece came into the world with a measure of ugliness in it. That ugliness is the sign of the creator's struggle to say a new thing in a new way, for an artist can never repeat yesterday's success. And after every great creator there follows a second man who shows how it can be done easily. Picasso struggled and made this new thing and then Braque came along and showed how it could be done without pain.²³

Struggle, innovation, greatness, genius: like Pound, Stein distinguishes between the inventors and the diluters; like Pound or Williams, Malevich or Mayakovsky, she assumes that the artist's duty is to Make It New.

"Are these ideas right or wrong?" the narrator asks in Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady." The question is irrelevant. For surely the aura of Modernist art is that it was made by poets and painters, novelists and composers, who *cared so much*, that however questionable their politics, their ideology, their racism and sexism, they were nothing if not humble when it came to their own work. It had to be *right*, and that meant constant struggle and revision. Lawrence, who rewrote rather than revised most of his novels and short stories, wrote four versions of even as relatively minor a text as his essay on Whitman before he was satisfied with it.

The question for us, then, is what happens to the arts when they are no longer considered a Big Deal. If there is no "great divide" between art and mass culture, between High and Low, if art discourse is just another discourse to be placed alongside some other cultural practice like advertising, if indeed a given poet no longer plans on a *Collected Poems* but seems content to replace each volume with another, newer one so as to produce a string of works that may or may not be valuable *in toto* (Clark Coolidge is a case in point), how does the audience process that poet's oeuvre? Do we read Coolidge wholesale? Or select one of his thirty or forty small-press books and read it in the context of the jazz musicians who have inspired his work?

For Adorno, the production of art in an age of capitalist commodification could only be an act of negative mimesis, a form of resistance. For more recent Left criticism, even such resistance is no longer possible, and hence it is high time to replace an aestheticist "litcrit" with a more useful and disinterested cultural history and theory, with the methodology of anthropology whereby artworks and literary texts can be seen as so many cultural phenomena. But – and this is where those amazon.com reviews and related internet postings become telling – it seems that artworks refuse to go away. The new century is now witnessing, even as it did at the dawn of the twentieth-century, a renewed sense that *art matters*. "Poetry," as Charles Bernstein quips in *A Poetics*, "should be at least as interesting as, and a whole lot more unexpected than, television." And he questions Jameson's refusal to discriminate between the many possible responses to the productions of the present:

Failure to make such distinctions is similar to failing to distinguish between youth gangs, pacifist anarchists, weatherpeople, anti-Sandinista contras, Salvadoran guerillas, Islamic terrorists, or U.S. state terrorists. Perhaps all of these groups are responding to the same stage of multinational capitalism. But the crucial point is that the responses cannot be understood as the same, unified as various interrelated symptoms of late capitalism.²⁴

The reception of art, in other words, must always factor in *difference*, as must its production. The real interest of Modernist High Art, in this scheme of things, is not that it can be understood as one of many cultural discourses, but that its own discourse is so complex, varied – and intense. Let me conclude with some recent assessments of one Walter Benjamin's own favorites, Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, now in the process of being retranslated. There are currently sixty-nine readers' reviews of Proust's *Recherche* on amazon.com, almost all of them euphoric. Here is an assessment posted on 21 January 2004 by a Swiss woman who read the *Recherche* in French but writes about it in English:

Masterpiece of masterpieces!

Reviewer: [Carol Haemmerli](#) from Switzerland I had been intrigued by Proust since early age, for one of my favourite books is Gold and Fizdale's "Misia" and his name crops up all the time in it. I bought the Scott Moncrieff's English version in Paris over ten years ago and I know that

many soi-disant more authoritative versions have come out ever since. Yet, a few years ago I read the version in French as organized by Jean-Yves Tadié -possibly the best known pundit on Proust's work to date- and I have to say Moncrieff's translation doesn't stray that far from the original. "A La Recherche" is to me the most important book in the history of literature. Compellingly philosophical, psychological, soul-searching and esthetic, no details of life go amiss. I am alternately moved, stirred and surprised at Proust's dexterity in describing the wide range of human emotions and the complexity of human interactions. He talks about art, love, jealousy, nostalgia, ambition, social climbing, politics and you cannot fail to empathise with his prose or finding new moot questions with each new reading of his work. His book is as relevant to life as life itself.

To come to Proust via the duo-pianists Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, whose 1980 biography of the enticing Polish pianist and society figure Misia Sert – a close friend of Diaghilev, Cocteau and other artworld figures – was a charming but fairly ephemeral production, is nicely emblematic of the relation of High and Low in our time. Carol Haemmerli first learns of Proust from Fizdale and Gold, whose affinity to Proust was surely not unrelated to their shared homosexuality, but once she actually reads the *Recherche*, she comes to find it “the most important book in the history of literature.” Each new reading, Haemmerli suggests, raises new “moot” (unanswerable?) questions. Literature is news that STAYS news. Indeed, it seems that a whole new generation of readers is poised to take on this and other Modernist novels and artworks. Immediately following Haemmerli, the amazon site quotes Bob Riggs from Houston, Texas, writing on 4 December 2003. “I just finished,” writes Riggs. “This is the most amazing thing I’ve ever read.” The Modernist “masterpiece” – that term of opprobrium--seems to be reasserting its auratic claims upon us, even as Internet discourse, held, in some quarters, to be responsible for the loss of literary “quality,” is ironically reinforcing its presence.

Notes

¹ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 9-10. For Benjamin's definition of *aura*, see “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968) 217-52, esp. 220-24, and. Cf. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 186-89.

² The Duchamp websites are especially remarkable, for example, *Tout-Fait*, which contains scholarly essays of unusually high caliber, archival material, illustrations, and so on. See www.duchamp.org and www.marcel Duchamp.net

³ John Banville, “The Rescue of W. B. Yeats,” *New York Review of Books* (26 Feb. 2004) 14.

⁴ Janet Malcolm, “Gertrude Stein's War,” *The New Yorker* (2 June 2003) 58-81.

⁵ Cynthia Ozick, “T. S. Eliot at 101,” *The New Yorker* (20 November 1989) 119-54; see 121, 152-54.

⁶ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford, 1967) 108, 110-11.

⁷ See Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhart (London: Routledge, 1984). This translation, considered rather unsatisfactory, was replaced in 1998 by Robert Kenter-Hullot's

much more scholarly translation, overseen by the author's widow Gretel Adorno and his executor Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 28, 36 and cf. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981) 256.

¹⁰ See Michael Hardt and Kathy Weeks, "Introduction," *The Jameson Reader*, ed. Michael Hardt and Kathy Weeks (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2000) 1-35; and, in the same volume "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" (1992) 123-48, and "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986) 315-- .

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1983, rev. 1991) in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 15.

¹² See Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford, 1999); Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertising, and Social Fictions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Carrie Noland, *Poetry at Stake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹³ Just after I completed this essay, a number of newspaper articles appeared on the subject of amazon.com reviewing as possibly a new form of scam since anonymous reviewers, who may or may not divulge their "real" identity, can now use amazon.com to puff or trash books for personal reasons. The author's spouse or friends, for example, may provide five-star reviews just to hype a given book. See Amy Harmon, "Amazon Glitch Unmasks War of Reviewers," *New York Times*, 14 Feb. 2004: A 1, A 12. But the case of classics like Eliot and Conrad is surely different, since the reviewer has nothing to gain from the comment in question.

¹⁴ See Cary Nelson (ed.), *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), selections from Louis Zukofsky, 551-56; George Oppen, 603-607; Edwin Rolfe, 608-619. For the online journal and multimedia companion to the anthology, which contains biographical materials, essays on individual poems, and bibliographies, see <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/>.

¹⁵ See the following: Harriet Scott Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance: Representation, The Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Judy Grahn, *Really Reading Gertrude Stein: A Selected Anthology with Essays by Judy Grahn* (San Francisco: Crossing Press, 1990); Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Maria Damon, *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Steven Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Janet Malcolm, "Gertrude Stein's War."

¹⁶ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934) 29. Susequently cited as ABC.

¹⁷ See Marjorie Perloff, "Vocable Scriptsigns: Differential Poetics in Kenneth Goldsmith's Fidget and John Kinsella's Kangaroo Virus," in *Poetry, Value, and Contemporary Culture*, eds. Andrew Roberts and John Allison (Edinburgh Press, 2002) 21-43.

¹⁸ *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (London: Oxford, 1964) 18; Yeats, *A Vision* (1937; New York: Macmillan, 1965) 141.

¹⁹ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1945) 4-5. Subsequently cited as LE.

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press 1970) 160.

²¹ See Marjorie Perloff, *Twenty-First Century Modernism: The New Poetics* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2002) 46-50

²² Gertrude Stein, "What are Master-Pieces," *Writings, Volume 2: 1932-1946* (New York: Library of America, 1998) 356.

²³ Thornton Wilder, "Introduction" to Gertrude Stein, *Four in America* (1934; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1947) vi-vii.

²⁴ Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 3, 93.