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# May Sinclair's Literary Criticism: A Commitment to Modernity

Isabelle BRASME

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- 1 When examining the actors and critics of literary modernism, the name of May Sinclair is probably not one that immediately comes to mind. Yet, Sinclair (1863-1946) not only lived and wrote at a time when modernist thought and aesthetic practices developed and flourished in English literature, but she was a stable presence on the London modernist scene. Suzanne Raitt reminds us that she “was a well-known and respected figure in the early years of the twentieth century” (Raitt 2). Sinclair’s voice could be often heard in avant-garde literary reviews, where she steadily championed the more innovative writers. The transitional character of the timeframe during which she lived, as a writer who was born during the Victorian era and who died just after the Second World War, may explain the way in which her work has often been overlooked within early twentieth-century literature. Sinclair was already well-established as an author when avant-garde movements started to gain impetus, and was significantly older than most of the writers who became the leading forces of modernism. The fact that she started suffering from Parkinson’s disease as early as the mid-1920s, and subsequently spent the next twenty-odd years in growing silence and oblivion, probably also played an important part in her lack of recognition.
- 2 Nevertheless, a survey of Sinclair’s life, literary work and critical writing consistently shows her as deeply committed to exploring and advocating innovative modes of thinking and forms of art, and firmly entrenched in the twentieth century. Among other interests, she was an active suffragist; she was also passionately involved in helping develop and promote the new discipline of psychoanalysis. Both of these topical matters – the status and rights of women on the one hand, and the complexity and changeability of the psyche on the other, constitute central themes in her fiction. Likewise, an overview of Sinclair’s critical work, which is rather sizeable, reveals a remarkable stability and single-mindedness in Sinclair’s views on literature; and a stance that is openly and eagerly supportive of innovative writing.

- 3 Sinclair's criticism, however, also reveals that her criteria for innovative and modernist writing do not quite overlap with those to which the contemporary scholar may be accustomed. This is where her transitional status in the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century period becomes most apparent, but also provides an unexpected and illuminating insight into modernist writing in general; not looking back, as is bound to be the case a century after the fact, but looking ahead, and surprisingly cognisant of the changes that were taking place as well as those yet to come. This paper therefore examines the transitional quality of Sinclair's critical work, and explores the way in which it may help us reconsider the categories of modernism against the grain of what came to be accepted definitions of modernist writing. Finally, Sinclair's criticism of her fellow modernist writers allows us to gain a better awareness of the innovation present in her own fiction, including her earlier works, and of her career's trajectory as it moved away from traditional realism to psychological realism.

## 1. Brontë Criticism: Towards a New Realism

- 4 Before moving on to Sinclair's criticism of twentieth-century authors, taking a look at Sinclair's sustained critical involvement with the Brontë sisters during the decade preceding the war seems appropriate on two counts. Firstly, Sinclair's introductions to the Brontës' novels in the Everyman series and her monograph on the Brontës feature among her earliest work as a critic, and as such may contribute to delineate the development of Sinclair's singular voice in early twentieth-century criticism. Secondly, Sinclair valued the Brontës' novels for the way in which they paved the way towards more innovative modes of writing in the following century. They were certainly integral to her own development as a modernist novelist.
- 5 Many scholars have underlined the similarities between the Brontës – Charlotte Brontë in particular – and Sinclair. Suzanne Raitt's biography of May Sinclair opens with a series of parallelisms between these authors (Raitt 1-2), and their kinship is further developed later in the monograph (114-126). Theophilus E. M. Boll also draws parallels between Sinclair, Emily and Charlotte (Boll 213), as does Jane Silvey in her article on May Sinclair and the Brontës. Sinclair was asked by Ernest Rhys, the founding editor of Everyman's Library, to write the introductions to those of the Brontës' novels that were published in the series, namely *Wuthering Heights* (1907), *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* (1908), *Villette* (1909), *The Professor* (1910), and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1914). In these essays, Sinclair appears concerned above all with highlighting the innovative streak in the Brontës' narrative mode, especially the way in which, according to Sinclair, they anticipated psychological realism, which is itself at the heart of Sinclair's narrative technique. In *A New Matrix for Modernism*, Nelljean Rice argues that Sinclair "made several interesting connections between the penchant for the self-conscious interiority of modern narrators and the novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë" (Rice 61). Boll also notes that Sinclair's main focus in these introductions is the way in which the realism of the novels shifts from the factual to the psychological, as in her introduction to *Jane Eyre*:
- The unique greatness of the book was not established by any test of thoroughgoing realism, but by the test of the quality of its passion. She judged Charlotte to be the first English novelist to handle the real thing in its essential purity. (Boll 214)
- 6 This is confirmed in Sinclair's introduction to *Villette*, which she considers to be the first psychological novel in English literature: 'In *Villette* [Charlotte Brontë] was the first to

give to that method [of psychological analysis] the place it holds in the English novel of today' ("Introduction," *Villette* xviii).

- 7 This focus on psychological realism can also be found in Sinclair's monograph on the Brontës, which was published in 1912. The writing style of this volume is intensely personal; Boll refers to *The Three Brontës* as "a brilliantly written informal essay" (Boll 260), and there is indeed a strongly individual note to this work that is akin to that of Ford Madox Ford in his critical essays. This perhaps reveals that Sinclair's study of the Brontës did not merely touch her as a reader, but impacted her as a writer. In her essay "May Sinclair and the Brontës: 'Virgin Priestesses of Art,'" Jane Silvey remarks on the deeply personal tone of Sinclair's criticism:

At times Sinclair's energetic defense of Charlotte and Emily in *The Three Brontës* approaches a partisanship scarcely in keeping with literary criticism; it indicates the depth of her passionate engagement with their lives and works and their vital significance to her fiction. (Silvey 167)

- 8 Ford likewise focused his critical attention on novelists that he believed paved the way for the modernist novel and for the impressionist style of writing that he advocated, as in his study *The English Novel* (anon2018-03-15T11:22:00R1929). Interestingly, one can also find striking similarities between Sinclair's account of the Brontës' writing and Ford's theorisation of literary impressionism. Sinclair keeps drawing pictorial analogies, as when she praises the realism of Charlotte's characterisation in *Shirley*:

She has learnt to draw her minor masculine characters with more of insight and of accuracy [...]. With a few strokes they stand out living. [...] Not only is Mr Yorke painted with unerring power and faithfulness in every detail of his harsh and vigorous personality, but there is no single lapse from nature when he is speaking. (*Three Brontës* 133)

- 9 This is strikingly similar to Ford's method of characterisation as defined in his 1914 essays on Impressionism. The first article starts with a reference to a drawing by Hogarth as an example of what should be achieved in writing:

do you know, for instance, Hogarth's drawing of the watchman with the pike over his shoulder and the dog at his heels going in at a door, the whole being executed in four lines? [...] Now, that is the high-watermark of Impressionism. ("On Impressionism" 169-70)

- 10 The fundamental criterion through which Sinclair assesses and compares the various novels is the degree of what she repeatedly refers to as "reality." Here again, her concern is not with the more factual realism that is usually considered as central to Victorian fiction, but with a deeper authenticity of character and feeling. Sinclair thus contrasts *Shirley's* "devotion [...] to the very actual" with "the profound reality of *Jane Eyre*," which she found superior (*Three Brontës* 134). This "reality" implies a new form of realism: it is no longer so much a question of mimesis, of imitating the real, as that of "rendering" it, much in the same vein as Ford's impressionist theories in which "rendering" is preferred to "representing," or as Conrad's goal "to make you feel - [...] before all, to make you see" (*Nigger of the Narcissus* xi).

- 11 Additionally, Raitt has remarked that Sinclair's criticism on the Brontë sisters was part of a larger renewal of interest in the Brontës in the early twentieth century:

The start of a new century encouraged reassessments of the great Victorian authors, and the Brontë sisters were especially attractive because they posed most acutely many of the questions asked by the increasingly active pre-war movement for women's rights. (Raitt 116)

- 12 Indeed, as is argued by Raitt, the Brontës' writing was topical for Sinclair not only as it contributed to shape her own renewal of novelistic mimesis towards a psychological form of realism, but also because it touched on the emancipation of women, a topic that was to be at the heart of Sinclair's novels – and which Sinclair, interestingly, defines as “modern” when delineating it in the Brontës' novels. *Jane Eyre* is thus depicted as “remain[ing] to this day young and splendid and modern” (“Introduction,” *Jane Eyre* xii); *Shirley* is considered as “the ancestress of the great modern heroines, big-souled, unsentimental, and untamed” (“Introduction,” *Shirley* xlv; qtd Raitt 117). Exploring the way in which the Brontës anticipated questions of feminine emancipation helped Sinclair come to terms with her own stance as a single woman in the early twentieth century, and make the question more salient in her work. Interestingly, among the reviews that came out when *The Three Brontës* was published, and which were largely positive, an article in the *Nation* hypothesised “whether Sinclair's peculiar tone of exultant praise is not due to her conception of the Brontës as rebels against the limitations imposed on the feminine intellect, rather than to a just literary appreciation of the Haworth novels” (*Nation* 96 104).
- 13 *The Three Brontës* found their most obvious literary pendant in Sinclair's novel *The Three Sisters*, which was published two years later and which Raitt argues is “the first novel in which Sinclair experimented with psychoanalytic models of the family and of identity” (Raitt 140). Sinclair's study of the Brontës thus bore a direct influence on the development of a new mode of realism in her own work. In her essay on Sinclair and the Brontës, Jane Silvey offers a detailed analysis of the ways in which her study of the Brontës impacted Sinclair's own literary work. Her main argument is that *The Creators*, which is generally considered as enacting a shift towards the stream-of-consciousness technique, as well as the better-known *Mary Olivier: a Life* and *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, the two novels which are most indisputably regarded as granting Sinclair a place among the modernists, all owe a considerable debt to Sinclair's criticism of the Brontës: “it is no coincidence,” Silvey argues, “that this ‘shift’ in perception and approach occurred at the very time when she was deeply immersed in the Brontës' lives and works, and had their model of representing the ‘truth of women's experience’ Isabelle Brasme2018-03-23T10:21:00IBanon2018-03-15T11:25:00Rbefore her eyes” (Silvey 169). Sinclair's concern for rendering women's inner lives in as unmediated a way as possible is ubiquitous in her fictional works. Her joint interest in the Brontës' writing on women's experience and in their foray into psychological realism translates directly into her own use of the stream-of-consciousness technique to render what she felt was specific to women's psychology and experience.

## 2. In Defence of Imagism

- 14 Sinclair's criticism of the Brontës, which established her as an authority on the three novelists, allowed her to gain confidence in her work as a critic and at once to defend more innovative authors and express bolder views. Directly following her involvement with the Brontës, Sinclair came in close contact with the young Imagist poets – Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, and H.D.. Despite, or perhaps because of the age difference between herself and the group of poets, Sinclair was fascinated with their innovations in poetry, and became loyally protective of their writing, as reaching a level of modernity that she herself found difficult to attain. Sinclair in particular realised there existed a

profound kinship between psychological discoveries and imagist innovation. She supported them financially and through favourable reviews. Most striking in Sinclair's reviews of her Imagist friends' work is the fiercely defensive tone that she adopts. "Two Notes," which appeared in *The Egoist* in June 1915 with the subtitle "I. On H.D. II. On Imagism," Isabelle Brasme<sup>2018-03-21T11:07:00</sup>Banon<sup>2018-03-15T11:26:00</sup>Rwas written as a response to Harold Monro's article, "Imagists Discussed," which had appeared in the review only a month previously. Sinclair's tone towards Monro is scathing; she derides him for attempting to assess the Imagist poets using the criteria of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century writers such as Ben Jonson, Dryden or Wordsworth. Overall Monro's article is in fact laudatory of H.D.'s writing, but not, Sinclair considers, in sufficiently warm terms. Sinclair champions enthusiastically the principles of Imagism as practised by H.D.: "sheer emotion, [...] clean-cut and perfect beauty," and density of meaning. She thus quotes *The Oread*:

Whirl up, sea—  
Whirl your pointed  
Splash your great pines  
On our rocks,  
Hurl your green over us,  
Cover us with your pools of fir.

15 Sinclair comments:

And [Monro] finds fault with H. D., not because she gives him images, but because she has only given him "one image."

Has he never been on a hill, in or under a pine-wood, when it is tossed about by the wind? Doesn't he see that in this one image there are many things—colour, movement, sound and energy, the whole appearance and the passion of the pine-wood and the wind, that there are at least three passions and three agonists, the pine-wood, the wind, and the "Oread" who desires to be covered with the pine-waves, to be splashed, to play with the tumult of the pine-wood and the wind?

The miracle is that H. D. has got it all into six lines, into twenty-five words. ("Two Notes" 88)

- 16 The article thus constantly refers to Monro's criticism and counters it with Sinclair's own assessment of H.D.'s writing, thus simultaneously commenting derisively on Monro and enthusiastically on H.D.. Sinclair's major argument in defending H.D. and more largely, Imagism, is again related to the question of rendering reality, and is made in pictorial terms, in a way that echoes strikingly her above-quoted appreciation for the Brontës' fully-fledged visual descriptions. She also refutes Monro's suggestion that Imagism is just a form of Symbolism: in Imagist poetry, she argues,

The Image is not a substitute; it does not stand for anything but itself. Presentation not Representation is the watchword of the school. The Image, I take it, is Form. But it is not pure form. It is form *and* substance.

- 17 Just as in her critical work on the Brontë sisters, "reality" is at the heart of the matter:

What the Imagists are "out for" is direct naked contact with reality. You must get closer and closer. Imagery must go. Symbolism must go. There must be nothing between you and your object. (88)

- 18 In a similar vein, Sinclair wrote a warm-hearted defence of Ezra Pound in the *English Review* after tanon<sup>2018-03-15T11:27:00</sup>Rhe war (1920). This article came at a time when Pound was becoming more and more controversial, as Sinclair acknowledges from the outset: "Mr Pound is not a respecter of respectable persons [...]. He has shown an arrogant indifference to many admired masterpieces of his day" ("The Reputation of Ezra

Pound" 326). Sinclair recognises Pound's iconoclast tendencies – "he may have been guilty of a few blunders, a few indiscretions and impertinences" –, but deplores the way in which these have obscured his contribution to avant-garde critical and literary writing. Boll considers that Sinclair played a major role in salvaging Pound's reputation in England (Boll 267).

- 19 The same vehement defensiveness can be found in Sinclair's article on T.S. Eliot's collection of poems *Prufrock and Other Observations*, which appeared in *The Little Review* in 1917, a few months after *Prufrock* was published in London by *The Egoist*. As in her review on Imagism, Sinclair opens her article by quoting and ridiculing the negative reviews that Eliot's poems received. She argues that Eliot's genius stands outside of tradition, and as such is disturbing to more sedate, conventional minds. Her review again alternates between praise for the directness of the poet's writing and contempt for the people she refers to as "comfortable minds:" "I suppose there are minds so comfortable that they would rather not be disturbed by new beauty and by new magic like this" ("Prufrock" 12). Once more, what makes Eliot's superiority in Sinclair's view is his unmediated rendering of "reality" – the word again recurs numerous times through the article: "he does not see anything between him and reality, and he makes straight for the reality he sees" (10). We find an almost literal echo of her review of H.D.: "Reality, stripped naked of all rhetoric, of all ornament, of all confusing and obscuring association, is what he is after" (12). The concern for reality is to be found until the very last sentence, which asserts that Eliot's poetry concerns itself with "ideas that are realities and not abstractions" (14).

### 3. Devising New Critical Tools: the "Stream of Consciousness"

- 20 Reading Sinclair's critical work on the Brontës and the Imagists alike grants us a higher awareness of the extent to which she was from the start, and throughout her career as a critic, poet, and novelist, concerned with defining an updated and as it were heightened form of realism. This focus is also central to her pioneering analysis of Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, which certainly constitutes the piece of criticism for which Sinclair remains best known to this day. Sinclair's review of the first three novels in the *Pilgrimage* series was published in *The Egoist* in April 1918. In many respects, it can be considered as encapsulating Sinclair's aspirations both as a literary author and as a critic. The review, significantly, starts with a metatextual comment on critical writing:

I do not know whether this article is or is not going to be a criticism, for so soon as I begin to think what I shall say I find myself criticizing criticism, wondering what is the matter with it and what, if anything, can be done to make it better, to make it alive. Only a live criticism can deal appropriately with a live art. And it seems to me that the first step towards life is to throw off the philosophic cant of the nineteenth century. ("The Novels of Dorothy Richardson" 57)

- 21 Sinclair thus camps herself unequivocally within the twentieth century, and on the side of innovation, for the sake of "life." She also openly advocates the personal note that prevails in her critical work. The article then moves on to defining "reality," something which is in fact rather rare in Sinclair's writing, despite her constant use of the notion: "reality is thick and deep, too thick and too deep, and at the same time too fluid to be cut with any convenient carving-knife" (57). Quoting J. B. Beresford's introduction to *Pointed Roofs*, the novelist, she suggests, must therefore "plunge in." This verb allows Sinclair to



introduce the sustained metaphor that leads her to the famous “stream of consciousness” phrase:

In this series there is no drama, no situation, no set scene. Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson's stream of consciousness going on and on [...]

In identifying herself with this life, which is Miriam's stream of consciousness, Miss Richardson produces her effect of being the first, of getting closer to reality than any of our novelists who are trying so desperately to get close. (58)

- 22 Whilst the metaphor of the “stream of consciousness” was coined by William James in 1890 on the topic of psychology, and was already common in psychological studies, Sinclair was the first to apply it to the literary field.
- 23 Dorothy Richardson did not herself embrace the phrase “stream of consciousness”, and rejected it harshly, declaring that “amongst the company of useful labels devised to meet the exigencies of literary criticism it stands alone, isolated by its perfect imbecility.” The notion of stream could not be reconciled with her own contention that consciousness was “stillier than a tree” (Richardson 562; qtd Bowler). In her online article on Sinclair's review of *Pilgrimage*, Rebecca Bowler notes however that Richardson nuanced her reservations several decades later:

But Richardson did agree with Sinclair's assessment of her novels as void of drama (“there is no drama, no situation, no set scene. Nothing happens”). She emphasises this herself, as late as 1952, in a letter to a critic, and extends it to include all the writers to whom the phrase ‘stream of consciousness’ has been applied:

This, I feel, was a natural development from the move away from “Romance” to “Realism” (the latter being a critical reaction to the former). It dealt directly with reality.

- 24 Richardson thus ultimately shares Sinclair's concern with “reality.” Furthermore, and notwithstanding Richardson's reservations, there is no doubt that after Sinclair introduced the phrase “stream of consciousness” to literary criticism, it became a pervasive formulation to render the flux of thoughts and free indirect discourse technique that was to become characteristic of and crucial to a large part of modernist narration.
- 25 Moreover, the eager and defensive tone of the review, which is in keeping with her aforementioned reviews of modernist poets, does not prevent Sinclair's analysis of Richardson's narrative technique from being remarkably astute and thorough, and offering useful reading tools for many other modernist works of fiction. She opposes the then widespread notion that Richardson's novels were “formless” and unstructured – “I have heard other novelists say that they have no art and no method and no form [...], that they have no beginning and no middle and no end” (58) – and describes in detail Richardson's method, which she considers to have reached “a high pitch of perfection” (58). Sinclair highlights the unfailing and rigorous restraint exercised by Richardson in order to render Miriam's experience of life without any narratorial intervention whatsoever. She then moves on to extol the painterly quality of the descriptions, in a manner that is again highly redolent of Ford's definition of impressionism and of her earlier criticism of the Brontës and of the Imagists:
- The mere “word-painting” is masterly. [...] It looks easy enough to “do” until you try it. There are thirteen figures round that table, and each is drawn with the first few strokes, and so well that you see them all. (58)

- 26 The lexical echoes that can be found with Sinclair's work on the Brontës testify to the consistency of Sinclair's predilection when it comes to description, and confirm the anticipatory character of her assessment of the Brontës' novels as paving the way for modernist fiction.
- 27 Sinclair's analysis then moves on to the density and concentration of feeling that is palpable in Richardson's narration:
- You look at the outer world through Miriam's senses, and it is as if you had never seen them so vividly before. [...] It is as if no other writers had ever used their senses so purely and with so intense a joy in their use.  
This intensity is the effect of an extreme concentration on the thing seen or felt.  
Miss Richardson disdains every stroke that does not tell. (58)
- 28 This, as well as the concluding paragraphs of her review, help us gain a better understanding of what Sinclair means by "life" or "reality:" "Nothing happens, and yet everything that really matters is happening [...]. What really matters is a state of mind, the interest or the ecstasy with which we close with life" (59).
- 29 Rebecca Bowler has highlighted the way in which Sinclair here is also really reflecting on her own aesthetic goals. Bowler regards her review of *Pilgrimage* as one of the "stepping stones on the path to her first successful portrayal of this in fiction: *Mary Olivier's* 'merging of the stuff of consciousness with the stuff of the world.'" Indeed, Sinclair's criticism of her contemporaries is especially illuminating. Beyond giving us an interesting insight into the way modernism was considered by an author whose transitional status made her particularly perceptive, it also offers us a valuable tool in understanding Sinclair's trajectory from nineteenth-century fiction to early twentieth-century avant-garde writing.

#### 4. May Sinclair's Transitional Modernity

- 30 When reading Sinclair's prose devoted to her own literary work, many echoes can be found of her reviews devoted to her fellow writers. Her 1914 introduction to *The Judgement of Eve and Other Stories*, for instance, encapsulates both her aesthetic choices and the way in which she considered her work as taking full part in the avant-garde movement. To account for the shortness of her story "The Judgement of Eve" she advocates a radical economy of form:
- There is no earthly reason why a novelist should not boil down his novel, why he should not present his subject in the most intensely concentrated form, reduced to its simplest possible expression. [...] He is justified if his work shows that he could not, without damaging his effect, have added one word or taken one away'. (ix-x)
- 31 This is in perfect keeping with Sinclair's defence of Imagist poetry in 1915, and of H.D.'s poems in particular. Conversely, Sinclair then defends the length of the *Wrackham Memoirs*:
- The story in it is the story of certain psychological happenings, certain emotions and impressions, certain complexities, far more essential than the material plot, of which those passages helped to preserve the balance and the value. (xi)
- 32 Sinclair here positions her fiction in the wake of the emphasis of the psychological over the material that is at the heart of her criticism of the Brontës, and that will also be at the core of her reading of Richardson's fiction four years later. Her description of her own narrative technique also matches in a large part that developed by Ford Madox Ford in

his theorisation of impressionism. About the method of “oblique narrative,” Sinclair thus states:

It is difficult because of its severe and embarrassing limitations. But its defects become its qualities where certain limitations happen to be the essence of the desired effect; where motives are dubious and obscure; where the interest of the entire performance lies in *how* certain things and certain people appeared to the teller of the tale. The way he makes it out, his surmises, his doubts, his divinations, his interferences, which would be criminal in direct narration, are lawful and expedient here; they are all part of the game. Hence the eternal fascination of the method for those who love to deal in half-lights and obscurities, in things insubstantial, intricate, and ill-defined. (xi-xii)

- 33 This bears an interesting resemblance to Ford's concept of “justification” as exposed in his Isabelle Brasme2018-03-23T10:23:00IBanon2018-03-15T11:29:00Rsecond 1914 article on Impressionism:

In order to produce an illusion you must justify; in order to justify you must introduce a certain amount of matter that may not appear germane to your story or your poem. Sometimes, that is to say, it would appear as if for the purpose of proper bringing out of a very slight Impressionist sketch the artist would need an altogether disproportionately enormous frame; a frame absolutely monstrous. (Ford 324)

- 34 Both authors argue that a circumvoluted and apparently needlessly digressive narrative mode is sometimes necessary to gradually build a full impression upon the reader; no detail is in fact gratuitous, but everything participates instead of the “progression d'effet” theorised by Ford. This claim for an unstable, “obscure” meaning and for a meandering narrative mode firmly positions Sinclair's aesthetic agenda within the modern movement. Re-examining Sinclair's literary work with her own criticism in mind thus allows us to realise that the core of Sinclair's writing style and goals shares indeed much in common with avant-garde techniques.

- 35 Sinclair's stance within the modernist movement, however, does remain singular; and enthusiastic though her reviews of more avant-garde novelists and poets might have been, her position needs to be nuanced when one takes a closer look at some of her critical writing. If we go back to her review of *Prufrock*, for example, Sinclair's attitude to Eliot – and to the Vorticist movement, since some of Eliot's poetry was published in *Blast* – does not appear to be quite as wholeheartedly supportive as her stance towards the Imagists. Suzanne Raitt points out that Sinclair mentions T. S. Eliot's association with *Blast* as the major reason why more conservative critics beware of his writing:

Mr. Eliot is dangerous. Mr. Eliot is associated with an unpopular movement and with unpopular people. His “Preludes” and his “Rhapsody” appeared in *Blast*. They stood out from the experimental violences of *Blast* with an air of tranquil and triumphant achievement; but, no matter; it was in *Blast* that they appeared. (“Prufrock” 9)

- 36 Significantly, when stating this cause for unease, Sinclair does not altogether dismiss it as unfounded. Raitt follows this remark by studying the way in which Vorticism is depicted in *The Tree of Heaven*, since the paradigm of the vortex is at the heart of the novel. Yet as Raitt underlines, in the Vorticists' view, “the vortex was a primal, but self-sustaining, economy, with its own aesthetic of contained movement and speed”. In *The Tree of Heaven*, the meaning of the vortex shifts and becomes “less an image of aesthetic containment than of a moral and psychological abyss” (Raitt 169):

The Vortex fascinated Dorothy even while she resisted it. She liked the feeling of her own power to resist, to keep her head, to beat up against the rush of the whirlwind, to wheel round and round outside it, and swerve away before the thing got her. (*Tree of Heaven* 124, qtd Raitt 169)

- 37 Raitt suggests that Sinclair may be using her fiction to express a more severe opinion than she dared directly articulate in her criticism, and is here voicing her reservations against “the Vorticist move into abstract art and its repudiation of an art that recognized and celebrated Isabelle Brasme2018-03-23T10:24:00IBanon2018-03-15T11:30:00Rhumane values” (Raitt 170). In *The Tree of Heaven*, the image of the Vortex is indeed used to epitomise a “swirl,” a “whirlwind” in which characters lose sight of values and psychological landmarks; it is even defined as “the unclean moral vortex” by the main character’s mother (*Tree of Heaven* 156). Despite her loyalty to avant-garde writers, Sinclair was at times hard-pressed to wholly reconcile her own views with those of the more advanced modernist movements. Indeed, the most consistent element that emerges from the entirety of her criticism is a tension between her enthusiasm for experimentation and her steadfast attachment to “reality,” a notion that was both aesthetic and ethical for Sinclair. Contrary to a more canonical, accepted version of modernist writing, Sinclair’s modernism certainly does not initiate a clean break from realism. Suzanne Raitt has stressed the inherent tension in Sinclair’s works and views between an attachment to Victorian aesthetics and an attraction to modernism:

Sinclair’s evolution into a modernist novelist, coupled with her nostalgic attraction to Victorian literary, especially poetic, styles, meant that during the transforming years of the First World War she found herself caught in a contradiction she described as characteristic of modernity herself. (Raitt 183)

- 38 Sinclair’s postwar review of Richard Aldington’s poetry likewise offers a reflection on the tension between the pull of modernity and the influence of Ancient Greece that is palpable in Aldington’s poems. Aldington, Sinclair argues, “still waits for that intelligent comprehension which might have been his if he had been more conspicuously the child of his own nation and his own age” (“The Poems of Richard Aldington” 397). Sinclair considers that Aldington belongs in another era: “he should have been young when Sappho or Anyte of Tegea were young” – and yet simultaneously that “there is no mistaking his modernity” (197). Isabelle Brasme2018-03-23T10:24:00IBanon2018-03-15T11:32:00RSuch a tension also epitomizes Sinclair’s own relationship to her time; it is in fact at the heart of the modern condition in Sinclair’s perspective, as is highlighted by Raitt:

Internal contradiction and incompleteness defined the modern movement for Sinclair, who like Aldington found herself trying to occupy several worlds at once: the Victorian world of her childhood social values, the world of her early allegiance to German idealist philosophy, and the contemporary world of Pound, anon2018-03-15T11:34:00RH.D., and the others. Her championing of the imagists’ immersion in both the classical and the contemporary world was also a defence of her own cultural and psychic predicament. (Raitt 184)

- 39 One may argue this tension between the classical and the new is at the heart of the modern condition for many early twentieth-century writers, including the Imagists themselves. Sinclair’s multiplicity of influences, and her refusal to disown the importance of her Victorian heritage within her writing for the sake of modernity, invites us to be more alert to an alternative outlook on the way in which modernism emerged and defined itself. Against the grain of the retrospective established canon of modernism that implies a break with tradition, anon2018-03-15T11:36:00RSinclair invites us to delve into

the nineteenth century to look for the roots of the modernist narrative. Where other modernists have looked back much further in the past, to primitive art, Greece or the medieval troubadours for instance, Sinclair evinces a distinctive stance in her acknowledging a direct continuity from nineteenth-century to twentieth-century innovative writing. Rather than smooth out or ignore the tensions between traditional realism and the rejection of mimesis as contradictory or illogical, her criticism invites us to accept these tensions as the very essence of the modern condition; and to reconsider the relationship of avant-garde and its past in terms of a complex continuity rather than a rupture.

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## ABSTRACTS

Although May Sinclair's work has tended to be relegated to the periphery of modernism, Sinclair entertained close relationships with many major modernist figures such as Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, and Rebecca West. A prolific novelist, Sinclair also wrote extensively on ways in which literature could participate in the modern movement, from the Brontë sisters to the Imagist poets, and is perhaps best known for first applying William James's metaphor of the "stream of consciousness" to literary technique in her analysis of Dorothy Richardson's first three instalments of *Pilgrimage*. Additionally, Sinclair's intensely personal and dynamic critical style is itself a mindful exercise in a more innovative approach to criticism that proves akin to the modernist works that she tackles. Lastly, Sinclair's criticism of her fellow modernist writers gives us a better insight into the innovation present in Sinclair's own literary works, and into her career's trajectory as it moved away from traditional realism to psychological realism. Examining Sinclair's critical work thus allows us to establish the specificity of her perspective on modernist practices of writing and to re-examine the canons of modernism against the grain of what came to be the accepted definition of avant-garde writing.

Bien que May Sinclair tende à être reléguée aux marges du modernisme, elle occupa une place indéniable au sein de l'avant-garde littéraire anglophone. Ses nombreux écrits critiques sur le modernisme furent le plus souvent publiés dans *The English Review* et *The Egoist* ; ils témoignent d'une loyauté et d'un enthousiasme constants pour les mouvements littéraires d'avant-garde. Romancière prolifique, Sinclair démontre dans ses écrits critiques une volonté permanente de définir et de saluer les façons dont la littérature peut participer de la modernité, depuis les sœurs Brontë jusqu'aux poètes imagistes. Sinclair demeure probablement célèbre au premier chef pour

avoir la première utilisé l'image du courant de conscience dans le domaine littéraire, à travers son analyse de *Pilgrimage* de Dorothy Richardson. En outre, le ton singulièrement personnel qu'elle choisit d'adopter vise à renouveler le mode de l'écriture critique au début du vingtième siècle, à l'instar des innovations littéraires que ses articles explorent. Enfin, le travail critique de Sinclair invite à relire ses propres œuvres littéraires afin d'en apprécier davantage le caractère novateur, et de mieux comprendre la trajectoire qu'elle effectue du réalisme victorien au « réalisme psychologique » ainsi que les tensions inhérentes à son œuvre.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** criticism, imagism, modernism, novel, realism, Sinclair, stream of consciousness

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