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Introduction

Adrian PATERSON and Christine REYNIER



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Introduction

Adrian PATERSON and Christine REYNIER

This issue is dedicated to David Bradshaw.¹

- 1 This special issue of *E-rea* focuses on the non-fictional prose writings of the modernist period. It brings to the fore essays, diaries, articles, letters, reviews, manifestos, short books, and other non-fictional prose texts by a variety of authors, many familiar, some less familiar, orbiting at different distances from the centre of this phenomenon called “modernism,” and whether travelling centripetally, centrifugally, or aslant all responding in different ways to its gravitational pull. That singular term “modernism” has in scholarly discourse tended to become the plural “modernisms” (Nicholls, Childs). This issue of *E-rea* embraces and extends this sense of pluralism by its focus on non-fictional prose writing, sometimes a lesser-observed, relatively forgotten cousin when compared to the dominant genres of writing of the period and the enormous (and necessary) scrutiny they continue to attract. Considering together the non-fictional prose texts of modernism explores the way in which these texts make and remake, draft and redraft, construct and deconstruct a series of conflicting and convergent modernisms; it also intimates how reading them anew might affect the current state of the field.
- 2 The issue thus observes plural modernisms in the making, and brings to view some less considered texts. Following such less-travelled paths it discovers much of great interest. While T. S. Eliot’s essays such as “Tradition and the Individual Talent” have long been considered landmarks in criticism, many other prose writings by his contemporaries have been used largely for illustrative purposes or only to expand on their own creative work. While they have often been put to good service, crucially this leaves their theoretical potential and careful generic positioning insufficiently explored. Attempting therefore to consider these texts *sui generis* has been a paramount consideration, as well as drawing in less-familiar texts to make a meaningful grouping and comparison.
- 3 The renewed scholarly emphasis on modernist magazines and other journals of the period makes reexamining such writing all the more prescient. An interest in the

history of the book has naturally widened to include all kinds of printed matter and ephemera, and prioritizes a perspective that considers these items as published material, examining in different ways all their signs and bibliographic codes. Notably, scholars as diverse as Gerard Genette, George Bornstein, and Jerome McGann developed many ideas in conversation with modernist texts, and some of their influence can be felt here. Moreover, recent editions of modernist prose (such as *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot* edited by Ronald Schuchard et al) have brought to our attention fugitive prose items sometimes not reprinted since their original publication, now available to view in a comparative context. These texts demand new appraisal and a concomitant reappraisal of the wider production of their authors as actors in a publishing marketplace. Similarly, new or revisited editions of diaries and letters (see for instance the ongoing projects of edited letters from Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats) help to re-place their authors as part of a vital correspondence network or present them working in new imaginative spaces between the public and the private. Indeed, modernist writers' letters or diaries have only rarely been explored as literary writings in their own right, complete with their own conventions and convention-breaking. Looking at them anew provides fresh theoretical openings in their construction of varied and varying modernisms.

- 4 The scholar to whom this issue is dedicated, David Bradshaw, hated generalizations. One of the authors of this introduction has had the experience of being made to strike out words like "Victorian" or "Modernist" from prose essays until the richness and complexity behind such terms could start to be comprehended. As he reasoned, "the relationship between imaginative writing and the ideas it embodies, shadows, or kicks against is [...] complex, multiplex, and sensitive" (2). His approach focused on the particular, demanding extensive detailed research in archives and libraries of published and unpublished material so that sometimes painfully won, luminous details might be aggregated, and the complexity of the mosaic image they produce respected. This is an approach some of our contributors take, just as others view what appear to be familiar details or texts in new light. Understandably, then, these essays do not present a singular view, and such a journal edition considering different kinds of texts, authors, and publication circumstances should not attempt to provide one. There is no need, and no desire to (as Yeats occasionally desired) to "hammer [their] thoughts into unity." Instead a silent dialogue and debate between the authors of the articles collected here develops in which they broach the many facets and contradictory principles of several modernisms.
- 5 Nonetheless there are common threads apparent. One is a reinvigorated sense of modernism's own historical arc, which reconsiders its continuities and conventions, and the foundations of its lexicon. So these essays contribute to the reassessment of modernism as pursuing some of the literary principles developed by their forebears, from the Romantics to the Victorians, rather than as a form of rupture creating a clean break with the past. David Bradshaw might have approved, given his suggestion that "the temper of a historical period is always and inevitably continuous with the past as well as being fissiparous, contradictory, manifold, and fugitive" (2). In this vein these essays speak to recent scholarship that, especially by considering modernism as a European-wide phenomenon, seeks to restore the lost connections between aestheticism, decadence, and modernism (Sherry; Coste, Delyfer and Reynier). Perhaps the most striking and surprising element of this, even to ourselves as editors, is the continued presence of the occult, the magical, the supernatural, or at least its

aftereffects in very different kinds of modernist writing. This might be expected of an author like W.B. Yeats, whose prose, from his essay on “Magic” (1901) onwards, proclaims his obsession in the occult to the consternation of contemporaries and critics (Essays 28-52) or even Henry James, whose brother the psychologist William James headed the American version of the Society for Psychical Research; but such interests affect figures as diverse as Ezra Pound, who while he explained to modernism’s benefactor John Quinn that Yeats had gone “queer in his head about ‘moon’” (13 December 1919, Foster 157), nonetheless pursued the Eleusinian mysteries, and even Samuel Beckett, whose readings of James Joyce show an occluded interest in alchemical imagery and geometry. If the writing of Joseph Conrad or Virginia Woolf, in different ways so dedicated to pursuing the limits of human experience, can be said to be marked by what Stephen Ross calls “disavowal” of the supernatural, considering their non-fiction prose is perhaps the best place to observe this complicated dance of attraction and retraction happen, as their writings too pass *The Shadow-Line* and enter into *The Haunted House and Other Stories*. Scholarly interest in material modernisms should not neglect the immaterial, and such interests surface several times in essays whose connections help to draw a map of ghostly influences on modernist writers and writing. Given a recent emphasis on technological modernism, this represents an important corrective, and as these essays find, such supernatural interest proves in language and sensibility to be rather less at odds with materialist explanations and scientific vocabulary than has sometimes been considered.

- 6 In his essay “How I Began” (1913), Ezra Pound avows: “The artist is always beginning. Any work of art which is not a beginning, an invention, a discovery, is of little worth. The very name Troubadour means a finder, one who discovers” (707). Typically, Pound here recasts *all* literary history as being always about newness, beginnings, invention. Still, there is no doubt that, thanks to the efforts of Pound and others, however defined the modernist period is, it is commonly perceived to be about the new. Yet if these essays question a break with the past, they also watch as lava from the modernism’s volcanic eruptions harden into convention. So, twenty years later, by the time of Pound’s collection of criticism *Make it New* (1934), some of modernism’s tenets could be seen as old-hat. If this results in a renewed attention on the critical views of late-modernists such as Samuel Beckett and Flann O’Brien, it also casts modernists as contemporaries not only of each other but of other writers less associated with the term. A more variegated picture of modernism is thus produced in which the received canon is questioned, just as it was in the modernist period where, as we learn here, Eliot’s work, later canonized, was not always appreciated by such contemporaries as May Sinclair or E.M. Forster. Here precise attention to critical vocabulary is crucial. So T.S. Eliot, whose own definition of “modernist” in fact described movements he saw as unhappily antithetical to his own beliefs and the core principles of the Christian church, draws clear lines of continuity between “tradition” (for him also a notable aesthetic term), religion, and conservatism. Now representing many people’s definition of modernist, he can be seen here in reactionary mode as well as looking forward sufficiently to anticipate the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Examining such questions and details delineates a pull and counter-pull between progressive and regressive political positions as well as ethical and unethical ways of being, and the vexed relationship between revolutionary aesthetics and reactionary politics can be seen in a new light. Even the manifesto, that bastion of avant-garde and revolutionary thought,

has a history, and its use (and abuse) by Flann O'Brien and others marks its own self-conscious recognition of a genre developing its own tradition.

- 7 Arranged very roughly in chronological order by subject, in these essays we look on as modernism becomes tradition. But through their concentration on modernism's non-fictional prose we can also observe the creation and development of its critical apparatus. Naturally the authors themselves spend time reflecting on the figure of the artist as critic. This was unquestionably a preoccupation of the period. So Oscar Wilde declared, "The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography" (Wilde 3), but also more gnomically, "when critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself" (Wilde 4). George Bernard Shaw expressed skepticism of critics who were not also artists: "I am no believer in the worth of any mere taste for art that cannot produce what it professes to appreciate" (8). Arnold Bennett, who wrote fine essays in the *New Age* under the pseudonym of Jacob Tonson, went further, arguing that it was the creative artist who "produces the finest and the only first-rate criticism" (158). In letters to his son W.B. Yeats, the artist John Butler Yeats stressed that "the difference between the minor and the major artist is that the major sort was receptive as well as creative" (65). All these anticipate T. S. Eliot's better-known statements in his essays that "criticism is as inevitable as breathing" and "the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour" (*Selected Prose*, 13, 30).
- 8 What is perhaps of more interest than this particular lineage is the clear precedent for combining a writing life with the practice of criticism. The modernists were like their contemporaries in the late-Victorian, Edwardian, and later periods, in that many were also professional critics. A list might include W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, H.G. Wells, E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, and Aldous Huxley, but also May Sinclair, Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and Elizabeth Bowen, to name but a few. Scrutiny of non-fiction prose in particular thus allows us to observe these writers as practicing authors. They worked and wrote for a living, in a field in which the practice of book-reviewing and criticism and (given the chance) the collection of such fugitive pieces was a vital part of a writing life. As Woolf mentions more than once in her diaries, these outlets provided a break of attention from creative work and a space for new ideas where "stray matters" prove to be "the diamonds of the dustheap" (20 January 1919, *Diary* 1, 234). The practice had the added advantage of allowing these authors break new ground for the reception of their work.
- 9 It might be more often remembered, as Stephen Ross observes in his introduction to *Modernist Theory* (2009), that "Modernist writing thinks theoretically and theory writes modernistically" (2). The theory and methods of criticism itself owe so much to the modernist period. Considering modernist writers and writers-about-modernism together in non-fictional prose thus seems a natural course. So examining in context a writer and critic like May Sinclair, who, following William James coined the single most persistent phrase to emerge from the modernist period, "stream of consciousness" (as repeated in thousands in student essays), draws connections between many of these themes: a continuity with the nineteenth-century, the hardening of modernism into convention, and the prospect of a lesser-known author, indeed a professional writer-as-critic, with both an oblique relationship to modernism and many contrasting writing selves.
- 10 Lastly, then, this collection of essays unashamedly turns to the persons, personalities and personal interactions of modernist writing. Doing so is not an uncomplicated

business, and nor can this be simply a return to the biographical preoccupations of past criticism. In particular, therefore, these essays have an interest in the different kinds of authorial selves available to view, and how they are shaped by different manners and genres of writing. The pseudonyms of Ezra Pound and Flann O'Brien, the masks and voices of Pound, W.B. Yeats, Woolf and T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster's dry commentaries public or private, or Samuel Beckett's pastiche and lexicographical shape-shifting, all play a role here. Ever-present is the constant sense that these writers even *in propria persona* are not themselves in prose but playing themselves; in particular that prose is a way of trying out new selves. They also are playing and representing others, and the collision of their private interactions and public interventions make the theme for several of these essays. Many of these writers wrote many letters and kept diaries as testing-grounds in which they also, at times, talked about writing, contemplating different writing methods and techniques, refining and redefining their ideas. Virginia Woolf, perhaps the most notable of these, developed this writing practice throughout her life, but she was not alone. Today's critics can occasionally be dismissive of such statements and texts, saying that writers writing about their own writing are like snakes biting their own tail, ouroboros figures with limited self-perception and insight, or criticize the process as unnecessarily self-reflexive and therefore limited or not worth exploring. Oddly when it comes to authorities like T.S. Eliot some of these strictures can be relaxed, and theories of tradition and impersonality pursued through his and others' writing. It is right of course that writers should not have the last word on their work. There is no sense that this is the case here, or that these essays simply represent writers in unguarded private moments; there is always a mask, a discourse, a generic expectation, or anticipated answer. According to Yeats, the poet was "never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast," but nor was she necessarily any one of many different writers (*Essays* 509). As Woolf declares in *Orlando*, each of us "may well have as many thousand" selves (193). It is perhaps the sheer plurality of these writers' non-fiction selves which makes the most impact here.

- 11 This special issue of *E-rea* contains versions of papers presented in 2016 at the ESSE (European Society for the Study of English) conference at National University of Ireland, Galway, and some additional ones from welcome contributors. In the lead paper, Stephen Ross's underlying assumption is that there are continuities between the Victorian and the modernist writings. Instead of broaching them directly, as, for instance, Vincent Sherry or Bénédicte Coste et al. do, Ross deals with them in an indirect way while theorizing them in terms of disavowal, a concept borrowed from Freud which is here brilliantly adapted to read the aporetic strategies of Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf's non-fictional but haunted, spectral prose: notably the prefaces to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *The Shadow-Line*, and Woolf's essays on ghosts. Disavowal emerges as a concept which both contains the contradictions of modernism and illuminates them. The paper makes a powerful case for a rereading of modernism itself in the light of disavowal. By bringing to the fore May Sinclair's non-fictional writings, Isabelle Brasme too traces lines of continuity between nineteenth-century fiction and modernism and shows how Sinclair saw the Brontës as precursors of modernism. Virginia Woolf might not have disagreed, since she herself rated the Brontës highly and placed them alongside George Eliot as among the forerunners of modernism; but if Woolf's statements are fairly well-known, Sinclair's are not. Brasme argues that Sinclair's criticism on the Brontës, together with her better-known review on Dorothy Richardson, helped her shape her own new form of realism, based on

psychological exploration, a type of writing which, together with her perceptive criticism, anchors her firmly among the modernists.

- 12 The term “modernism,” now commonly used to refer to literature, music, and the plastic arts of the early twentieth century (Mao & Walkowitz), should not be taken for granted, as Anna Budziak points out. In a compelling piece, she draws our attention to the theological history of the term. This was the context with which T.S. Eliot was familiar, and her essay traces in his letters, talks and reviews Eliot’s opposition to theological modernism, its concern with interiority, and its disapproval of the supernatural – an opposition paradoxically in line with his opinion of literary modernism. Disentangling Eliot’s views of classicism and modernism, she unexpectedly comes to define Eliot as an anti-modernist. Such a reading of T.S. Eliot’s criticism is renewed by Zekiye Antakyalioglu who boldly undertakes to read Eliot with Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy. By tracing lines of continuity between Henri Bergson, Eliot and Deleuze, the author sheds a new light on Eliot’s well-known concepts – the objective correlative, his theory of impersonality, tradition or the dissociation of sensibility – which are rephrased in Deleuzian terms. Eliot thus joins a list of other modernist writers such as Joyce and Woolf who have been more often read with Deleuze’s philosophy (and were quoted by the philosopher himself). Jason Finch takes up the argument where Anna Budziak leaves it and enters, as it were, in a dialogue with Zekiye Antakyalioglu, indirectly debating the ethical implications of her reading of Eliot with Deleuze (through, for instance, the introduction of the concept of the shadow, as embodying in-betweenness and the refusal of binaries). In drawing this counter-portrait of Eliot, Finch focuses on E.M. Forster and Eliot’s little documented acquaintance and “dispels the secrecy that hovers over their relations” by reading closely two of Forster’s book reviews that were turned into essays, “T.S. Eliot” and “Two Books by T.S. Eliot.” He traces the changing fate of Forster’s and Eliot’s influence over each other and illuminates their respective understanding of modernism, shaped by religious fervour and sexuality in Eliot’s case, and in Forster’s case by very different political and ethical choices.
- 13 Paolo Bugliani returns to T.S. Eliot but places him alongside Virginia Woolf. Going back to the Romantics, he offers a valuable reappraisal of Eliot’s theory of impersonality as well as Woolf’s own take on (im)personality which he captures in her essays. Those hybrid pieces of fiction and non-fiction are the perfect site, according to him, where she can develop her singular plural voice, and disclose, much as Montaigne does, her “presence.” Entering Woolf’s work through another route, Annalisa Federici brings Woolf’s private or “intimate” epitexts – diaries and memoirs – to the centre of her literary production and analyses them as literary texts and creative ones which served as testing grounds for the writer’s innovative aesthetics. In the course of her analysis, she shows how intimately connected theory and biographical writing, and indeed theory and daily life, are for a modernist writer such as Woolf.
- 14 Adrian Paterson likewise inserts W. B. Yeats within a network of European-centred modernist artists ranging from Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis to American composer George Antheil and choreographer Ninette de Valois, and reaching out further to China and Japan. Focusing on a prose piece written in Italy by the Irish poet, *A Packet for Ezra Pound* (1929), he explores the publication history and the method of the text that served as a preface to *A Vision* (1937) and considers it alongside Yeats’s letters, with which it shares a conversational, if provocative, quality. *A Packet* is read as a conflictual and

creative work which straddles literary genres and plays with contraries; it appears on the whole as a protean text in the image of its polysemous title. Illustrating Blake's motto "without contraries is no progression" (and as such prefiguring Samuel Beckett's essay "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico..Joyce"), Yeats's manifesto-like text is both peripheral and central to the understanding of the poet's work and of the variegated character of modernism. Delving into precisely this essay from Beckett (published the same year, 1929), Julie Bénard disentangles its intricacies and its complex engagement with James Joyce's *Work In Progress*. She shows that in the process of defining Joyce's expression, Beckett exposes his own "hieroglyphic" theory of language as visual and aural, and implements an innovative form of writing that owes as much to avant-garde cinema as to Giordano Bruno and alchemy. By doing so she highlights the tension at work in Beckett's modernism between tradition and modernity together with its intermedial nature, and explores the singularity of his writing together with what it shares with Joyce, Eliot or Pound. Julian Hanna sets his essay within the larger landscape of recent criticism on the avant-garde manifesto as a distinct literary genre characterized by boldness, theatricality and outrage, that developed in the early twentieth century in Europe, and makes a case for a different genre, the anti-manifesto, typical of British and Irish writers and most especially Flann O'Brien. He situates the genre in relation to the manifesto and explores its gender bias and provocative stance in O'Brien's *Blather* (1934) and *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). If this article inserts O'Brien within the larger community of manifesto writers – Tzara, Marinetti, the Russian Futurists, etc. – and brings out the international nature of the genre and the modernism they defend, it also foregrounds its "language of rupture" (Perloff) and as such, comes as a counterpoint to the questioning of modernism as a break with its predecessors which is explored in most of the other essays here. The tensions at work in modernism and the plurality of modernisms thus emerges. Indeed, looking back at modernism through the lens of modernist writers' own non-fictional prose narratives also means looking forward, since many of the modernists' concepts still resonate in contemporary criticism and philosophy, and, as Hanna points out, modernist anti-manifestos can be traced up to the experimental British writer B. S. Johnson and the ecological critic Timothy Morton. The essays in *E-rea* thus finally bring out modernism's contemporaneity and its continued topicality.

- 15 The aim of this *E-rea* issue is directly to analyze such texts that have been considered as relatively marginal, whether by well-known modernist writers or more neglected figures, and observe how the paradigms they shape compare to those now regarded as modernist ones: the ordinary; the fractured; the unspectacular; the experience; the event, and so on. What version do they give of them? What other paradigms do they put forward? What narratives do these modernist non-fictional writings provide of modernism and how do they compare with the narratives of modernism provided by critical theory? For writers whose prose has been recently made available or those whose work deserves a reassessment, this issue is an invitation to consider all this and more. As Richard Aldington remarks in his introduction to D.H. Lawrence's *Essays*, "non-fictional prose is worse than essay, so until someone coins a better word we must stick to essays" (8). This issue has not devised a better term, perforce using "non-fictional prose," but the editors agree that this prosaic term does not encompass how brilliantly varied such pieces can be – and they add that neither can it express the broad scope opened for criticism in examining them anew.

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NOTES

1. The idea of convening an ESSE seminar on this topic germinated during Professor David Bradshaw's 2014 residence in the University Paul-Valéry Montpellier3. In conversation with Professor Christine Reynier within that institution's EMMA (*Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone*) seminar and on many other occasions, David's energy and generosity made him inspirational as a collaborator and interlocutor. Pursuing the project with Dr Adrian Paterson, a friend and former student of David's, and bringing it to fruition here is our testimony to David Bradshaw's memory, and to his unbounded and ongoing contribution to modernist scholarship.

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