Peter Nicholls

Modernist Figures

Volume 1: New Poetries

With a foreword by Chad Hegelmeyer

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Foreword

Chad Hegelmeyer

What was the proper material of modern poetry, and what, exactly, did it do with or to that material? I was an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley during the heyday of scholarly interest in literary modernism; my peers and I encountered these questions everywhere—reading all of Eliot alongside Dante's Divine Comedy with Steven Botterill, Pound's *Cantos* with Charles Altieri, Stein and Dickinson with Lyn Hejinian. On one particularly memorable day, during a labor strike of campus employees, my lyric poetry professor, Eric Falci, held class in the basement of an off-campus bar and nightclub to avoid having to cross picket lines. The basement was normally reserved for late-night dance parties and DJ sessions. Painted entirely black—floor, walls, and ceiling—it looked uncanny in the mixture of afternoon sun and fluorescent light and reeked of stale booze and bleach. We circled metal folding chairs, sipped coke, and ate French fries while discussing Marianne Moore's "Poetry." At the time, I felt strongly that poetry was not only a way of encountering and learning about the past, it also seemed to equip me with ways of understanding things that had previously baffled me about the present into which I was maturing, a way of looking back to the century into which I was born from the one which was just beginning. And so those questions about the necessity of lyric felt pressing, urgent.

I relate these reminiscences because my experience of reading Peter Nicholls's two-volume collection, *Modernist Figures*, strongly evoked reflections of my own first encounters with these poets and with questions about the possibilities of

teaching and learning through them. As Peter Nicholls observes in these extraordinary essays, some of these figures have themselves become thoroughly historical to us. It has now been more than a century since the publication of *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, *Tender Buttons*, and *Spring and All*. A quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, what perspective do we have on these works? What can they say about our present? As Nicholls writes in the fourth chapter, one of the challenges of teaching literary modernism is that "with every generation we move further from the cultural matrix that Pound clearly felt he shared with his reader."[1] Having recently returned to Moore's "Poetry" with my own students, under quite different circumstances than those in which I first read it, I believe this could be said about much of modernist poetry, not only that of Pound, though he, perhaps, represents a special case. But can that poetry, some of which attempted to find ways of reckoning with its past, now provide us with access to its own time, which finds itself in need of recovery by contemporary readers?

Modernist Figures, though, does not present the historicity of its subject as a cultural milieu being lost to the relentless revision of the "new." Nor does Nicholls succumb to the imperious critical tendency to make literary modernism a global or perpetual mode of explaining the present. In his rigorous and exciting readings, nostalgia and presentism are to be resisted. Instead, the past is seemingly "peopled by 'retreating figure[s]' whose faces are averted from us, denying us the immediacy of knowledge we feel compelled to seek"[2] but also one that, borrowing from Susan Howe, "cannot be

1 Volume 1, Chapter 4, "The Elusive Allusion: Poetry and Exegesis," 146.

2 Volume 2, Chapter 25, "'The Pastness of Landscape': Susan Howe's *Pierce-Arrow*," 343. Nicholls is commenting on the conclusion of *Pierce-Arrow*, (New York: New Directions, 1999), 144.

wholly past."[3] As Nicholls observes, "One of the most striking things about literary modernism is its persistent hold on the contemporary imagination…[and] so we continue to revisit it as if in search of some new clue to understanding our own troubled version of modernity."[4] Haunted by it, we find ourselves compelled to "rework" it. And so these volumes repeatedly present the past to us "in a compound tense…as at once a return and a turn to something new."[5] As Nicholls argues, Ezra Pound would attempt to make "that haunted space the very condition of modernism."[6] In this regard we are always reckoning with the problems of history that the literary modernisms observed in this collection were, in part summoned to answer. Can different forms of modernism actually provide us with the tools necessary to deal with the problems of temporality—the ongoing "shock of the new"—experienced in reading and thinking about them?

While lyric poetry's perennial concern has been with a "here and now" and an "imagined moment of plenitude,"[7] Nicholls argues that modernist poetics figure the present as always a "belated" one (in the sense of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*);[8] for this reason, an "innovative poetics" is also one that is connected to a "a radical approach" to history.[9] This is made most explicit in Volume 2, Chapter 25, "Unsettling the

3 Howe, *Pierce-Arrow*, 16. Quoted in "The Pastness of Landscape," 343.
4 Volume 1, Chapter 6, "Mud and Metaphysics: The Matter of Modernism," 191.
5 Volume 2, Chapter 14, "An Experiment with Time: Ezra Pound and the Example of Japanese Noh," 33.
6 "An Experiment with Time," 33.
7 Volume 1, Chapter 7, "'A Mouthful of Air': Modern Poetry and the Idea of Presence," 226
8 See Volume 2, Chapter 24, "The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms, and Toni Morrison," 295-6.
9 Volume 2, Chapter 25, "Unsettling the Wilderness: Susan Howe and American History," 321.

Wilderness" on Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark*. Howe, Nicholls writes, belongs to a "long and distinguished line" of American poets—like Ezra Pound and Charles Olson—who are also "freelance" historians. But it also holds true for many of the poets here who are not American or who are not even strictly poets (like Toni Morrison) but who share a keenly skeptical view of poetry's ability to make things truly present to us. It is *not* simply that the past is fated to persist and dominate the present (see Volume 1, Chapter 6, "Mud and Metaphysics"); rather the "matter of modernism" is always undermining a "metaphysics of the 'new.'"[10] This is what makes it possible for poetry to be, as Nicholls argues in the introduction to these volumes, a "counterforce…[a]gainst the coercive certainties of public discourse," a relief from the nightmare of repetition and (as Robert Duncan called it) the "agony of the contemporary."[11] Such a possibility is indeed a relief during a time when our public discourse seems dominated by factions whose appeals either to a supposed past or a grimly imagined near-future are equally coercive.

Modernist Figures offers lessons for literary history and the often vexed questions of periodizing the twentieth century. Readers will find that this selection of essays radiates out from Nicholls's still essential intervention into the "new modernist studies" in *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Second Edition, 2017). Throughout these volumes, Nicholls is refreshingly uninterested in a "clean-cut" chronology or "progression from one tendency to another."[12] Instead, figures

10 "Mud and Metaphysics," 192.

11 Robert Duncan, "The H.D. Book: Chapter 1," *Coyote's Journal*, 5/6 (1966), 19. Nicholls includes this quotation in Volume 2, Chapter 23, "Beyond the Cantos: Pound and Recent American Poetry," 270.

12 "Beyond the Cantos," 260

persist or crop up in unexpected points along the timeline. Nicholls discovers surprising inheritances of modernism from pasts that the modernists explicitly rejected or implicitly disavowed, connections to Melville's Orientalized skepticism, Swinburne's pre-Raphaelite classicism, and Ruskin's outmoded Victorianism. (He has continued to explore these figural inheritances in his recent work on Becket and Leopardi.) The essays on Pound often focus on the importance of his later work, volumes of the Cantos (like *Thrones*) that did not appear until the late 1950s or 60s, decades in which Pound's work—and Pound himself as a figure—was "still very much a live issue. Would he finish The Cantos? Was the poem irretrievably damaged by his political errors? Was a full recantation likely or possible?"[13] Similarly, Nicholls reminds us that new collections of poetry were being published by Objectivists like Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, and George Oppen well into the 1970s, concurrent with (and, as Nicholls argues, influential for) Language poets that we normally associate with the decade.[14] Although the essays themselves follow a more or less chronological order, one feels the alternative temporality central to the volumes' understanding of poetics in the associations across and among its many figures, as when chapters 27 and 28 on Lyn Hejinian's investment in "phenomenology" rhyme with chapter 14 on Ezra Pound's interest in Japanese Noh theater.

This holds true even for the collection's most seemingly chronological figure, Pound himself, who appears as a kind of hinge between the two volumes and for whom there is a section of poets and poetics that come "after." But this "after"

13 "Beyond the Cantos," 260.

14 See Volume 1, Chapter 11, "A Homemade World?", 372.

is much later than we might tend to think, and the Pound that comes "before" is "multifarious," contradictory, and his later influence even more so. There is a strong temptation—especially when thinking about *teaching* modernist poetry—to leave Pound on the shelf, so to speak, to draw our conclusions and so let him be forgotten, given the problematic or simply abhorrent character of his politics (a character that has only become more clear to us thanks to the work of Nicholls and other scholars).[15] But this is not, in fact, Pound's poetic legacy. As Nicholls explains, "his writings have become the seedbed of a whole range of different poetries" and "a counter-tradition to the one associated in America with Eliot and the New Critics" precisely because his "work has suggested different paths to different poets."[16] The poets that come "after" Pound do so in complex ways, and, despite the "political content of his work," they "have still found themselves able to learn from him, extrapolating stylistic and epistemological techniques which they have pursued to very different ends."[17]

From the second volume of this collection, one gets the impression that the multifariousness of this "after Pound" is possible precisely because of the failure of the Cantos as a historical project. For Pound does not appear here as a *model* for the kind of poetics that the book explores. (That is not the kind of "figure" he is and that is not how we or the later poets are to be understood learning from him.) Rather, Pound here works as a *cipher* of a certain kind of western modernity as

15 For a helpful discussion of Pound's politics that supplements the essays in these volumes, see Nicholls, *Ezra Pound: Politics, Economics, and Writing* (London: MacMillan, 1984).

16 "Beyond the Cantos," 259.

17 "Beyond the Cantos," 259.

much as a figure of it. Ciphering is, like some figurative writing or speech, a way of communicating in code, in secret, or in disguise, as Pound frequently (and contradictorily) found himself doing, especially in his later poetry. But a cipher is also like a figure in that it has numeric value, though its value is no value at all—a zero, null, blank or nonentity. The collapse of Pound's historically informed poetics affirms or reveals something about history itself to his contemporaries and successors and opens up the "different paths" and possibilities that later poets pursued, among these what Nicholls calls in the final chapter of the second volume "numerousness." It is perhaps not surprising that of all the "figures" in *Modernist Figures*, it was the *Rückenfigur*—ironically appropriated from romantic art into the poetics of the late twentieth century—that stood out the most for me, the figure that promises artistic passage but whose face is always turned away from us and thus becomes "as resistant to meaning as the figural quality of writing."[18]

How should we read and how should we teach literary modernism now? The essays collected in the two volumes of *Modernist Figures* not only explore a rich array of interpretive approaches, they also offer readers pedagogical strategies for a present still wracked by the shock of the new. The question of how to teach modernism surfaces all of the quandaries associated with its complicated relations to temporality and presentness. Can modernist poetry give us access to the past? For students the challenge of making sense of these difficult and exciting texts often seems to involve digging up the past, a seemingly pedestrian archaeological exercise that might be delegated to someone else or even a machine. Or

18 Volume 2, Chapter 26, "'The Pastness of Landscape': Susan Howe's *Pierce-Arrow*," 360.

our students' discomfort with the opacity and recalcitrance of modernist texts may lead them to the desire for a reassuring master code that ushers them away from the intense pleasures and rewards of dwelling with difficulty and exploring their own interpretive activity. But as Nicholls demonstrates through his own inventive and instructive acts of reading, modernist figures have been refusing for over a century the deprivations involved in resorting to prosaic paraphrase and the reduction of the poetic to the merely discursive.

These are pressing questions given the contemporary's especially fraught relationship to history, what the past should mean to us now and whether or how it should be reckoned with—questions that animated much of literary modernism itself and thus, perhaps, connect us still to those forms of modernism even as they recede ever further into the past we aim to confront. Despite the remarkable and vibrant expansion of approaches in modernist studies, the term modernism itself at times seems to risk extinction. Yet there continues to be great interest in these texts from our undergraduate and graduate students. In historical periodization, pedagogy, and continued research modernism is at a crossroads. But perhaps it always was—or is even constitutive of a crossroads. These volumes teach us that the discovery of "something new" might also reveal the limitations and aporias of "the way we think now."