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**Review Article**  
**Classical Modernism**

At a time when such a great deal of critical energy and attention is being lavished on defining the concept of postmodernism, it's almost uncanny to find two books, those by Sanford Schwartz and by C.K. Stead under consideration here, both taking yet another look at modernism (or Modernism as they both would have it).<sup>1</sup> Uncanny, I mean, in the sense of a little discomfiting; perhaps our sense of the nature and place of modernism is going to be reviewed and our still developing ideas about the character of postmodernism thereby changed mid-stream? Or perhaps, as some of the more conservative champions of modernism like to suggest, we'll find that there's really no such thing as postmodernism and we're not entitled yet to talk about at all about a "post" beyond modernism? More positively, maybe these books could help resolve some of the issues surrounding the discussion of the relation or articulation between postmodernism and modernism: for instance, do these terms refer to discernible historical periods, or to specifiable artistic modes and styles (to schools, merely), or loosely to some identifiable sensibility?

In fact, neither of these books does much to help in the kinds of inquiry that the term modernism automatically brings up in our day. Instead, both are content to stay for the most part within the rather firmly established bounds of what by now I think can be called 'classical modernism'—the years and the texts which constitute what has been called "the last literary season of Western culture."<sup>2</sup> Both authors more or less confine themselves to the British tradition and their central *texts* are clearly and predictably Pound's and Eliot's. In Schwartz's book discussion of these seminal figures is subvented by discussion of several late nineteenth century philosophers; Stead's discussion, more purely literary-historical, adds consideration of Yeats and Hardy at one end of Modernism, and Auden at the other. For Schwartz the *period* is demarcated between the turn of the century

and the beginning proper of Pound's long poem, *A Draft of XVI Cantos* in 1925; Stead defines Modernism as belonging to roughly the same period—he actually talks at length about the years after 1925, but largely to explicate his sense of the general failure of Modernism.

Thus both authors work with definitions of modernism that are of the narrowest, and yet each promises substantial revision of these much discussed topoi. Of the two Schwartz makes the largest claims for revision but does the least. He discusses classical modernism in the light of what he calls its philosophical “matrix”—broadly speaking, the debates over the relation between conceptual abstraction and experiential sensation, which accompanied the late nineteenth century's questioning of traditional scientific rationalism. Looking at Bergson, William James, Bradley and Nietzsche, Schwartz establishes a broad similitude between their concerns and those of Pound and Eliot. Specifically he wants to show that both the theoretical and poetic hobby-horses of modernism (abrupt juxtapositions, ‘impersonal’ style, claims for the autotelic text, and so on) all fit in some way with the work of these philosophers.

The point is not surprising; the place of Bradley's work in Eliot's has been discussed for a very long time now, as has Pound's second-hand familiarity with these philosophers, by way of Hulme and de Gourmont for example. Schwartz's effort adduces little from this matrix and, although his sophomore's summary of the philosopher's work might be useful to some readers, this idea of a matrix is a problematic one. At several points Schwartz is in a hurry to deny that he is explicating a set of influences (although his chapter on Eliot seems to do just that), or that he wants to sketch a *Zeitgeist* for classical modernism (although this does seem to be the book's result).

In other words, it's not quite clear what this matrix is intended to demonstrate. It certainly produces no new readings of the philosophers and omits consideration of some of the important thinkers of the late nineteenth century (it can be argued that in many ways Marx, Freud and even Frege had more of a presence—albeit a negative one—in classical modernism than say Nietzsche or James). Equally the matrix yields nothing very exciting about Pound or Eliot and their work. Indeed, far from revising our sense of these modernist poets, Schwartz has gone back to repeat ideas that were promulgated at the very beginning of the criticism of modernism. Schwartz points to modernism's non-mimetic forms, its attempts to restore original meaning to instrumental language, its ability to offer meaning as it emerges from a flux of particulars, its oscillation between and attempts to unify subjective and objective language, and so on; any informed reader of the criticism of modernism will be already familiar with these notions

and the debates surrounding them. More particularly, most of what Schwartz has to say about Pound was apparent in the early scholarship by such as Kenner, Emery, or Davie.<sup>3</sup> There are many others, but Schwartz actually alludes to only half a dozen works on Pound. The scholarship in relation to Eliot is no better, with just one book cited. Either Schwartz has never read or he has forgotten the work done. In that regard his claim to revise our sense of modernism is bound to fail. Having myself engaged in hostilities with this tradition of criticism at various times,<sup>4</sup> I have no special brief to hold for it; but it strikes me as something of an outrage that those germinal ideas which have been elaborated, reworked and critiqued for about three decades can be trotted out again, this time claiming to constitute "a new perspective" (p. 11).

One of the books Schwartz might have done well to take account of is C. K. Stead's *The New Poetic* (1964) which was quite influential in formulating the description of English literary modernism (classical modernism) which has served and continues to serve as the orthodox view. Stead had many contributions to make. In particular one might want to recall his claim that within Eliot's so-called impersonal and objective aesthetics there was a competing strain of the romantic. (Schwartz, after a rather pedantic tour of Eliot's thesis on Bradley, manages to reach the same conclusion twenty years later.) Stead's new book consists mostly of changes, corrections and elaborations on his ideas of two decades ago. For him now Modernism proper is the period up until 1925 roughly, when the first mature work of Pound and Eliot emerged from its peculiar and specific melding of Symbolism and Imagism, and the qualities of the poetry of both these movements, are what Stead claims as substantially the qualities of Modernism itself. Briefly, Symbolism emphasises the structure of musicality and Imagism produces the "sculpted image." The combination of the two modes accompanies a willingness to depart from conventionally restrictive forms (especially, as Pound was found of pointing out, the pentameter itself) and the tendentious attempt to free poetic language from its traditional status as the container of poetic stuff. The Modernist poems of these two writers proceed by what Stead calls the "aggregation" of particulars, and thereby avoid undue abstraction. Poetry in these years claims its status as a quality and not a form, thus managing in Stead's view to convey an authenticity of feeling, or inspiration.

A good deal of Stead's argument relies upon his discussions of Yeats and, to a lesser extent, Hardy. These poets worked as much in reaction to the presumed errors—emotional vagueness, for instance—of the nineteenth century as did Pound and Eliot, and Yeats especially was in many senses a pupil of Pound the early Modernist. But the older poets

work differently than their Modernist heirs—and this proves that Modernism cannot be defined simply in terms of its historical role as modifier or correction of the nineteenth century. Yeats and Hardy are for Stead the pre-moderns, as it were. Each is discussed even-handedly, but finally negatively in relation to both the aims and the achieved monuments of Pound and Eliot. Yeats gets the tougher time, since his work is apparently too susceptible to the lure of form and to an ensuing kind of stiltedness which squashes the poem's emotional origin. Hardy seems more congenial to Stead since his work is less disturbed by its attachment to various forms and does not depart so far as Yeats' from its inspirational spring. Neither of them, however, ever achieves the heights that Stead claims for classical modernism.

Stead illustrates his sense of the crucial differences between modern and Modernist by running through a kind of annotated history of the path of Modernism. He draws up an interesting account of the relationship between Yeats and his young "secretary" and teacher, Ezra Pound. The younger poet's influence is most apparent in *Responsibilities* (1914) where Yeats shows he has learned from Pound and from the Symbolist ethic how "to develop stronger, less wavering rhythms as well as harder diction" (Stead, p. 25). But Stead shows the parting of Pound's and Yeats' poetic ways when the latter refuses to follow Pound into the disposition of "merely exquisite or grotesque fragments" and the "more style than form" that he finds the *Cantos* to constitute. Stead's own proposition, elaborated in competent, comparative readings of "Maunderley," "Gerontion" and "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," is that Pound and Eliot were formulating a way of writing which would transcend Yeats' fault of over-planning, of letting feeling get "lost in the design," and of squashing the "mysterious life" of poetry (see p. 82-3). The flowering of the Pound/Eliot mode comes, of course, with *The Waste Land*. Stead gives the history of the composition of that poem, stressing more than would many other critics the power of Pound's interventions. But most importantly he reiterates *The New Poetic's* view of Eliot's essentially inspired and organic (i.e. Romantic) disposition. Indeed, Stead claims, in line with his more general argument, that where Eliot is most "deliberate and conscientious" (p. 111) his work is banal and flat and that his much-vaunted neo-classicism is merely "skin-deep" (p. 120).

*The Waste Land* appears to be the crucial Modernist document for Stead in so far as its aetiology is a combination of (Pound's) new open form technique and (Eliot's) romantic inspiration. But Stead claims that the towering achievement of this poem is not sustained by the British tradition—or indeed by Pound and Eliot themselves. For the next generation of poets—Auden, Day Lewis, Spender and the rest—

the *lesson* of the poem is disorganised: the poem and Eliot's critical work bequeath no guiding principles to the poets of the thirties and Pound became something of an irrelevance and an embarrassment as he left England and espoused fascism in Italy. Through Auden in particular Stead diagnoses this collapse of the Modernist heritage (though it should be said that even by Stead's own description of it Modernism seems to have a very thin heritage).

Stead's chapter on Auden begins Part II of this book, "1925-1950: Modernism and Politics," and is to Stead's credit that, almost alone amongst the traditional critics of modernism, he has chosen to confront the rather sordid political history of our supposedly major poets. Auden, Eliot and Pound are all equally castigated for politicising both their poetry and their lives; this, Stead claims, happens only to the detriment of Modernism in particular and poetry in general. Eliot turns Modernism into a bogus and mechanical enterprise motivated by his fascism and straitjacket religiosity; Pound in the increasingly abstruse *Cantos* takes it to the same extremes as he takes his right-wing thinking; Auden fails to take on the mantle of Modernism because of his 30's allegiance to leftist politics.

Stead appears in this part of the book to be making the broad claim that poetry and politics simply do not mix and to be suggesting that, after all, poetry is too precious to be thus tainted. However, after many pages of reiterating this sentiment Stead suddenly suggests that "if the present chapters have seemed to suggest that politics is inimical to poetry, that is only because the record shows that in some ways it was so at a particular time and place. No permanent rule is to be inferred—or only a very general and cautionary one" (p. 249). I suspect that this disclaimer will be scarcely convincing to a reader who for over two hundred pages has had recited to her the special and precious qualities of poetry which springs from "authentic emotion." The problem here with Stead's approach is that he appears incapable of conceiving either that an authentic *political* emotion might have existed in the head of Auden or Pound, or Eliot, or that they might have been able to 'elevate' such an emotion to the status of poetry. Thus he is led to attack what I at least take to be some of Auden's most powerful and powerfully committed verse on the grounds that it exhibits the "characteristically Roundhead vice of moralism without style" (175). The distinction between moralism and style is obviously a false one in the first place, but it surely cannot sensibly be applied to most of the poems in *Look Stranger*; and how could it be applied to the following passage from Pound's "Canto 46" which Stead quotes disapprovingly:

FIVE million youths without jobs  
 FOUR million adult illiterates  
 15 million 'vocational misfits', that is with small chance  
     for jobs  
 NINE million persons annual, injured in preventable industrial  
     accidents  
 One hundred thousand violent crimes. The Eunited States or  
     America  
 3rd year of the reign of F. Roosevelt, signed F. Delano, his  
     uncle.  
 CASE for the prosecution.

Stead says of this: "It is a worthy political concern and powerful rhetoric, but it seems only to mark more clearly than ever the difference between what is politically and what is poetically effective" (p.269). That sentence stands as the only analysis Stead can offer of this passage and I'd suggest that it is not only emblematic of the fundamentals of his argument throughout this book, but is also thoroughly arguable. The opposition between rhetoric and poetry has always been an unstable one, demanding a gesture of nothing more than blind faith in order to be held.

But more importantly, the opposition between the political and the poetic is one that cannot be made today with even a fraction of the degree of Stead's certitude. One can claim (risking the charge of being a philistine from the likes of Donald Davie and perhaps Stead himself) that a passage such as this represents the height of Pound's achievement and actually proves the success of his life-long project to demonstrate that language is a political matter and politics is a linguistic matter. It's always struck me as a risible irony that so many of Pound's critics and champions have been those least willing or able to think through the ideological and political appurtenance not only of Pound's discourse but equally of their own. Pound has done perhaps more than any poet in history to render it an inescapable fact of life that poetic language as well as critical language live in a world of primarily social significations, none of them innocent or transcendent in the way that poetry is sometimes claimed to be. And there is Pound's greatness, like it or not.

The reluctance so many critics show in relation to this aspect of Pound's work has led to one of the greatest shibboleths in the criticism of modernism—the championing of his "Pisan Cantos" as the re-emergence of his true poetic talents amid the sordid aberrations of the rest of his long poem. Stead repeats that old chestnut at length, and even tries to advance the claim by suggesting that the "Pisan Cantos" actually revert to the purity of what he has identified as the heyday of Modernism, and that they thus constitute not only the revival of

Modernism but its last great moment. The critical ideology which wants to validate Pound's return to the "personal" and to the "lyrical" has adopted all sorts of bent strategies to do so, and it should be said that Stead's aligning these cantos with Modernism proper is one of the most efficient I've seen. Moreover, the detail of Stead's argument is sometimes quite interesting. For instance, he takes on many of the orthodox Poundians by suggesting that the nature of the poetic "I" which stands behind these lyrical stretches of verse needs to be questioned. This is not, he claims, the unified persona it is usually assumed to be, but something more diffuse and less "personal" (see p. 316ff.). A good deal of critical work, in an idiom different from Stead's and using concepts drawn from contemporary critical and psychoanalytical theory, has already attempted to confront that issue and produce an understanding of this and other types of textual phenomena in Pound's work.<sup>5</sup> It seems to me unhappy that Stead shows no familiarity with this kind of work since it undoubtedly would shed light on some of the problems like this one which he brings up consistently against the orthodox readings and readers of Pound's work. In fact there are many occasions in this book—not only in his discussions of Pound—when the details of Stead's readings take him quite some distance from the orthodoxy and bring him to the point where any useful continuation of his argument would be aided by a familiarity with more theoretically informed modes of criticism.

That isn't to say that Stead is "untheoretical" quite—a fairly useless charge that would be in any case. Rather it is to say that his thinking and his scholarship bring up interesting questions which his critical vocabulary (nay, his critical *parti pris*) won't allow him to follow through. What happens instead is that, confronted with certain issues, he falls back into the most 'know-nothing' of critical positions. For instance, on one occasion Stead considers what the notion of musicalisation in poetry might mean as a critical term. He disagrees with Davie's view that musicalisation "involves a rejection of the conscious mind" and himself ventures a banality about its "heightening of consciousness." This is followed by an astonishing and unabashed cop-out: "One day we may know enough about the physiology of the brain . . . to understand . . . how [musicalisation] occurs. In the meantime one can only say that there is a very sound basis, in critical observation and in the testimony of poets, for Keats's remark "If poetry come not as naturally as the leaves to the tree it might as well not come at all" (p. 336). This last quotation might be allowed to stand as the bottom line of Stead's critical approach; but it wouldn't convey adequately the fact that Stead has a better grasp on the theoretical issues and complica-

tions of modernism's history than many of his colleagues. In that contradiction resides the whole problem I have with this book.

It might be possible, just to end, to argue that the reasons for the collapse of the modernist experiment or the failure of classical modernism have everything to do with something which Stead's critical approach cannot take into consideration at all. Franco Moretti suggests that modernism (Eliot in particular) "attempted to solve in the literary domain problems that instead required the institution of new aesthetic and cultural systems." Moretti argues that the dawning of mass culture rendered if not impossible then at least problematic the traditional kind of privileging of literature per se that Stead relies upon. In the attempt to understand the demise of modernism, and to make sense of the post-modern world, we might have to accept that the concept of literature itself has become unstable and that "literary analysis can 'conclude' only outside its 'proper' domain."<sup>6</sup>

#### Notes

1. Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot & Early Twentieth Century Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); C.K. Stead, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Tradition*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986). Both authors capitalise the word modernism; wherever I do the same it is only to "quote" their respective certainties about the definition.
2. F. Moretti, *Signs Taken For Wonders* (London, 1983), p. 209.
3. See, for instance, D. Davie, *Poets as Sculptor* (London, 1963); C. Emery, *Ideas Into Action* (Miami 1958); H. Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (Norfolk, Conn.; 1951); etc.
4. See my *Pound Revised* (London, 1983), or my review article "Pound/Zukofsky" in *The Dalhousie Review*, vol. 61, no. 2, for instance.
5. See A. Durant, *Ezra Pound: Identity in Crisis* (Lewes, UK, 1981), and my own *Pound Revised*. For the same kind of work in relation to modernism more generally, see A. Ross, *The Failure of Modernism* (New York, forthcoming 1986).
6. Moretti, p. 210.