



Ripples in Modernist Waters: The Poetics, Ethics, & Politics of T.E. Hulme's Vision of Anti-Humanist Democracy

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Christos Hadjiyiannis's beautiful reading of T.E. Hulme's "Lecture on Modern Poetry" in conjunction with early twentieth century philosophical and social thought is exciting and timely given recent debates about how modernism ought to integrate the philosophical, literary, and cultural production of previously unheard voices within pre-existing networks. His nuanced and textured re-envisioning of Hulme's aesthetics invites an inquiry into the philosophy, literary practices, ethics, and politics that inspired them. Conversely, an inquiry into how Hulme critiques liberalism inflected ideology and literature through his aesthetics reveals how his urgency to reconstruct the social order was driven by his vision of ethics. To respond to this invitation in the space such a piece permits, I explore Hulme's connections with his contemporaries, Pound and Eliot, as well as less frequently considered dissonances with D.H. Lawrence and members of the Bloomsbury Group, to illustrate how discourse about the crisis of language and representation is inherently linked with ideological clashes around aesthetics, art, and politics that foreshadow the emergence of fascism and Nazi Germany.



Critics and scholars of modernism often focus, understandably, on what the French symbolists, and later Hulme, Yeats, Pound, and Eliot among others at the turn of the century termed the crisis of language in representing reality.¹ As Rebecca Beasley explains, Hulme sought to reconcile the opposition between immediate experience and organizing concepts. Citing Hulme, Beasley writes,

¹ For compelling discussions of the connections between Hulme and the symbolists, see *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry* by Peter Howarth and *Theorists of Modern Poetry* by Rebecca Beasley.

“For Hulme, poetry could compensate for the gap between experience and understanding, because poetry’s ‘direct language’ of images ‘arrests your mind all the time with a picture’” (Beasley 12). Beasley goes on to explain:

In other words, poetry constantly brings us up short and forces us to attend to the process of perception by which we are making sense of the world. In doing so, it makes us look more closely at the world itself, instead of relying on the clichés and lazy habits of thought that make up our everyday use of language. (Beasley 12)

Beasley incisively articulates Hulme’s view of poetry’s potential to challenge us to “attend to the process of perception by which we are making sense of the world” and speaks meaningfully to the subtle yet vital distinctions Hadjiyiannis notes between Hulme’s call to promote fresh, new forms that allow for a “sincere” expression of their age from the more prescriptive adaptation dictated by Imagist poetics.² Her account of Hulme’s development also corroborates Hadjiyiannis’s view that Hulme was more consistent in his thinking than he is credited for by some of his critics.³ In their introduction to *T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism*, Edward Comentale and Andrzej Gasiorek explain this in greater detail:

Hulme is thought to have been swept up in a faddish *Bergsonism* before returning to the dogmatism of his later years. A closer look, however, shows that much of what Hulme admired in Bergson’s thought was already present in his own: the emptiness of rational thought, the impossibility of pure vision, the intensive structures of the material world; both thinkers condemned the ideological closure of a rational world and sought release in a more dynamic interplay of self and other. More importantly, perhaps, Hulme’s writings on

² Each of the critics I cite draw from Karen Csengeri’s seminal *Collected Works of T.E. Hulme*. I’ve quoted from the critics’ excerpts of Hulme throughout my response rather than from Csengeri to preserve the contexts used by the critics I cite.

³ This consistency does not preclude changes in the means by which Hulme felt the ideal social order could be achieved and he writes candidly about these in his later work. It is the worldview underpinned by his commitment to classicism and religion that remains steady.

Bergson actually draw out the phenomenological unity of the latter's work and thus clarify its broad appeal to modernists of the left and the right; conversely, these writings expose Hulme's early emphasis on relativism and discontinuity, features that also underpin his later, apparently more conservative, positions. (Comentale and Gasiorek 5)

Hulme's commitment to the late-nineteenth early-twentieth century notion of classicism, then, predates his interest in and eventual move away from Bergsonian thought. In his essay, "Romanticism and Classicism," Hulme rejects romanticism's view that laws thwart innate human goodness in favor of the idea that "man is a limited being who requires organization and restraint in order to achieve anything of any value" (Hume 61, quoted in Beasley 48). Hulme's urgency to address modernism's crisis of language while maintaining a commitment to classicism as the end to resolving it remain consistent and form the heart of his anti-democratic politics.

His definitions of the terms classicism and romanticism would eventually intersect with some of the ideology of the French writer Charles Maurras who founded the right-wing anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, and nationalist Action Francaise movement (Beasley 41; Thacker 53). Maurras sought to unite France by overthrowing the democratic, romantic values of the French Revolution that broke what he saw as the core Western tradition, classical, passed down from Greece and Rome to the Latin church, by restoring the monarchy. When writing "Romanticism and Classicism" in 1911-1912, Hulme sought to balance the classicism Maurras advocated with the Bergsonian philosophies denounced by Pierre Lasserre as tools used by French left wing progressives.⁴ Eventually, however, he moved away from Bergsonian thought and felt that the British Tory Party ought to follow the example of drawing conservative French intellectuals as Action Francaise had done (Beasley 41; Matz 116-18).

Recent critical attention to the political views of early twentieth century modernists leads to an opening for more integrated readings of the aesthetic choices of writers and the socio-political ide-

⁴ In "Hulme's Compromise and the New Psychologism," Jesse Matz offers an incisive analysis of Hulme's partial correction to misreadings of Bergson's theories that led progressives to adopt, and from Hulme's perspective, misapply them. Although my response doesn't address theories of temporality in great detail here, Matz gives a finely nuanced interpretation of the contributions and limits of Hulme's efforts to understand Bergson rightly.

logies that shaped their thought and work. Hulme's poetics and politics establish how a literary practice that emphasized a more visual poetry reliant on a concrete language of words as objects emerges out of the political debates between Hulme and his peers about how to build a more stable social order through anti-democratic politics and classicist aesthetics as an urgent response to extreme, rapid change. Despite Hulme's unquestionably reactionary politics, however, Lee Garver explores how Hulme's earlier work, particularly his 1909 essays in the *New Age* reflects some unexpected "collusions" with socialism and progressivism when read in socio-political context:

[T]he *New Age* reveals that late Edwardian English politics facilitated surprising rhetorical collusions and alliances. Hulme was particularly intrigued by the possibilities of aligning himself with and addressing a large, radicalized working-class readership. In his 1909 essays, he employed rhetoric similar to that of a now forgotten socialist agitator named Victor Grayson, whose brief tenure as co-editor of the *New Age* had given the publication a huge boost in readership and a powerful influence among rank-and-file laborers. In addition, Hulme showed a remarkable readiness to employ language and imagery associated with radical feminists and opponents of British military authority, who were understood by many in the magazine to be natural allies of Grayson in his fight against Liberal parliamentary corruption. (Garver 134)

Although Hulme's views were never fully progressive and would grow increasingly reactionary over time, his initial "collusion" with labor, anti-militarism, and feminist rhetoric are all the more striking given his trenchant denouncement of Bloomsbury pacifism during the war and his on going anti-feminist rhetoric. Although he retained some commitment to socialism, the Great War would, ironically, lead him to a pro-military and pro-democracy position, albeit an anti-humanist one.

Andrew Thacker, drawing from Alan Robinson's analysis explains that for Hulme, "Continued suffragette action, the first Labour members of Parliament in 1906, waves of industrial strikes throughout 1911-12, and the prospect of mass enfranchisement threatened by the Liberal party posed a threat to the aristocratic old regime" in which Hulme's classicism was grounded (Thacker 50).

He continues by citing Perry Anderson, who maintains that

Hulme's turn to classic aesthetics marks a reaction to commodification (which troubled all modernist factions) just as much as to the threats liberal reforms posed to aristocratic privilege (Thacker 50). Read in this light, the insistence upon holding fast to a language that can bridge what Hulme felt to be disruptive, inevitable gaps between understanding and experience becomes not just urgent, but imperative in conveying meaning through art that serves as potent commentary upon the very questions of how to institute the order he and his supporters believed to be profoundly lacking in modern society. World War I marked a shift in Hulme's anti-democratic views and he sought a version of democracy that would combine the notions of liberty held by syndicalists and anarchists with the classicist aesthetics associated with English aristocracy. Such a system would provide the order and discipline needed for man who, by Hulme's account, was limited, depraved, and marred by original sin. By extension, art that could capture aspects of reality previously unseen (in this case, a realm of absolute religious value accessible only through the supernatural), marked a way to replace humanist secularism with his vision of an intellect-driven religious classicism that would sustain a responsible democracy.

Andrzej Gasiorek incisively articulates the connection between Hulme's ideology and poetics:

Hulme was influenced by the syndicalist Sorel and the anarchist Proudhon, for both men (despite the key differences between them) scorned the belief in human perfectibility and sought to articulate theories of social justice based on the conviction that human beings were fundamentally flawed. This aspect of Sorel's and Proudhon's thought dovetailed with Hulme's uncompromising theology. The result was a series of complex arguments to the effect that certain forms of geometric art were presaging a major transformation in thought (broadly speaking, from a secular humanism to a religious anti-humanism); that this transformation entailed the subordination of the individual to a non-organic and absolute realm of value; and that acceptance of human beings' radical imperfectability could lead to an emancipatory theory of democracy. (Gasiorek 158)

Hulme's view that art is not autonomous from its social or political context and is connected with human activity explains his insistence that as he sees it, certain forms of geometric art instigate

“transformations” of thought and move people closer to his own world view in which man’s weakness and disorderedness can be managed through a religious anti-humanism that is undergirded by a realm of absolute value. In urging us to consider Hulme’s larger work more broadly as it connects to modernism, Hadjiyiannis opens pathways for looking at how Hulme’s influences on Imagism, real and misconstrued, are linked to ways of mind and a worldview that was one potent view among many colliding positions with respect to debates that pervaded the consciousness of modernist intellectuals in the 1900s and 1910s and becomes inextricably linked with popular thought about government, religion, gender rights, sexual freedom, politics, and war.

Many modernist artists were responding to these debates through their own work; some responded directly through dialogue with Hulme’s writing. T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound shared many of the same concerns as Hulme, yet each opted for a different set of solutions to the situation as they understood it. For example, T.S. Eliot certainly draws on classicist aesthetics through his use of religious epigraphs, allusions to antiquity, and aspects of experimental verse, musicality, and imagery in “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” and in *The Waste Land*. Yet in the years following Hulme’s death in 1917, he increasingly turned toward rural agrarianism as a way to return to “absolute values which differed significantly from Hulmean practice.”⁵

Similarly, Pound also shared concerns about language and the representations of reality with Hulme, Eliot, and their philosopher mentors Bradley and Bergson, despite their sometimes differing views. He also drew significantly, though not fully, from Hulmean aesthetics to form Imagism. Accordingly, the distinction between how Hulme defines the image, in its conventional meaning as a visual sign, and Pound who defines the image as the intuition or the poem as a series of images combined to transmit an intuition is significant (Beasley 38). Pound’s political move from Imagism to Vorticism, his decidedly anti-religious views and his movement into futurism, anarchism and eventually fascism dictated his aesthetic choices and invites us to compare how varied understandings of

⁵ For further discussion of the differences between Hulme, Eliot, and Pound see Rebecca Beasley’s *Theorists of Modern Poetry*. For compelling discussions of Eliot and Pound individually, see *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* by Peter Nichols, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* by Pericles Lewis, and *Modernism* by Peter Childs.

reality and chosen ideologies infiltrate art designed to capture them in new ways with how artistic representation of these previously unseen perspectives dictate modernism's understandings of reality and by extension, of ideology.⁶ For figures such as Hulme, Bergson, Bradley, Eliot, and Pound, aesthetic practices and political ideologies sometimes comingled, inevitably influenced one another, and ultimately collided before diverging from one another. That said, attending to the multi-textured, abundant exchanges between these particular men is poignant for any study of modernism, not solely due to their engagement with long standing debates about what constitutes reality or how art can or cannot represent it but rather, the question of why these debates about what is real or how to represent it were so significant and contentious in these years leading up to and during the war.

I would like to turn now to a few names who are less frequently connected directly with Hulme studies: namely, D.H. Lawrence and members of the Bloomsbury Group, with particular focus upon Clive Bell, E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf. Of these figures, Lawrence is the only one who shared some of Hulme's right-wing politics, was critical of democracy (though Hulme eventually did come to support a democracy inflected by classicism, syndicalism, and anarchism), and directed many of his early novels to examining the effects of and antidotes to mechanization and industrialism on English society. Unlike Hulme, however, Lawrence proposes primitivism and a return to connections with the natural world to generate a connection with sensuality and vitalism to recover from the alienation caused by industrialization as well as what he saw as Christianity's damaging insistence upon a split between spirit and flesh (Lewis 78). This is best illustrated through the relationships of the experiences and encounters of the four main characters in *Women in Love*. Although this novel was published in 1920, it was written during the years of World War I, when Lawrence was unable to publish it due to its exceptionally bleak outlook given the already rough wartime conditions. I raise this example not simply because Lawrence's views conflict with Hulme's; rather, I suggest that Lawrence's support of primitivism coupled with his right-wing

⁶ In his *Cambridge Introduction to Modern Poetry*, Peter Howarth poignantly illustrates that the idea of art as a means by which to recover a deeply fragmented society first occurs Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* of 1795, maintaining that this idea had great stakes for modernist poetry.

politics demonstrates the existence of a spectrum of thinking in response to questions of how to respond to the rapid changes in society that we loosely refer to as the conditions of modernity. While Lawrence's political views partly intersect with those expressed by Hulme, Eliot, and Pound, their strikingly opposing ideological and aesthetic responses to these conditions demonstrates the web of intellectual thought that constitutes modernism, even though its creators may not appear to be in direct dialogue with one another.

The most significant opposition to Hulme's radical Tory politics, religious dogmatism, and commitments to concrete language and realms of absolute value lies in the liberalism of the Bloomsbury Group whose political and aesthetic practices were underpinned by commitments to the goodness and pleasure of human relationships, exchanges about aesthetics, pacifism, and what may appear an unexpected rejection of humanism that promotes notions of a universal subject. In his brilliant essay "Above Life: Hulme, Bloomsbury, and Two Trajectories of Anti-Humanism," Todd Avery examines how these two diametrically opposed philosophies both have roots in G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* and both, in very distinct ways, espouse an Anti-Humanism inspired by drawing upon distinct segments of Moore's work. Avery details how Hulme adopts Moore's view that there is something objective in ethics, which in turn leads him to call for "the development of a specifically scientific understanding of ethics as a corrective to the 'uncritically humanist' 'canons of satisfaction'" (Avery 170). In other words, Hulme experiences a shift in thought; moving away from Bergsonian vitalism, he begins to consider scientific exploration of ethics as a means to bringing about the radical transformation of society into one ordered by religion, discipline, and a democracy based upon Justice rather than emotion that can meet the needs of man as limited and depraved beings. For Bloomsbury writers like E.M. Forster or Virginia Woolf, however, fiction was a place in which the writer might try out the politics of empathy, press upon traditional relationship structures or sexual mores,⁷ and examine what Forster labeled the emotionally under-developed English heart and how it might be remedied through human exchange with more emotional cultures (Forster 5).⁸

⁷ Virginia Woolf considers questions of gender and sexuality through almost all of her works, most notably in *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*.

⁸ Forster's essay "Notes on an English Character" responds to charges that the

The contrast between Hulme's ideas and Bloomsbury's Moore inspired belief in the pleasure in human relationships and the discussions of aesthetics as good are unquestionable, and this makes the connection of each to Moore especially striking. Avery and other critics of Hulme often refer to his worldview as one that is incommensurable with those held by his critics. Yet in the context of conversations about networks and modernist exchange, attention to Hulme's perceptions of the socio-political conditions, and how modernist production should represent or respond to realities (whose very nature was so contentious), remains vital to envisioning the relationship between the incommensurable views that comprise the modernist landscape.

Hulme's disagreement with Bloomsbury Group members about pacifism and involvement in the Great War exemplify this perfectly. In response to Clive Bell's critique of "the ethically pernicious 'doctrine that a few rich and elderly men have the right to compel the young and poor to die for any cause in which their elders believe'" (Avery 175),⁹ Hulme critiques Bell and fellow pacifists for their naivety, their inability to comprehend the threat Germany poses to liberty in Europe (Avery 175). Hulme, in his 1916 installment of "War Notes," goes on to challenge Bell's assertion that any war that impoverishes "art or thought" regardless of the consequences, threatens "barbarism" and "disaster" for humans and that there must be those who will "serve interests higher and wider than the interests of any state or confederacy" by again asserting that such statements come from those who are too rich to know how money is made" and too utopian and weak to act heroically in the interest of England's security (Avery 175-76).¹⁰ Hulme himself would die in 1917, having celebrated artists who sacrificed themselves in the war, holding them up as the kind of heroic figures central to the transformed society he envisioned. Many of Blooms-

English are cold by proposing that they are rather the victims of England's public school education. The essay is written in the context of English imperialism. He explores questions of empathy and liberal humanism further through the plots of *A Room With A View*, *Howard's End*, and *A Passage to India*.

⁹ Avery takes this passage from Bell's 1915 pamphlet, *Peace at Once*, published by the National Labour Press. See Avery, 175, for further details on the origins and contents of Bell's work.

¹⁰ Bell's quotation comes from his article "Art and War" published in the *International Journal of Ethics* in October 1915, shortly after the burning of his pamphlet ordered by the Lord Mayor of London along with others published by *The National Labour Press*.

bury's proponents of pacifism, however, would live into the thirties and once again confront the threats of impending war, this time intensified by the rise of fascism and Third Reich. Works such as Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* and those of other writers and artists would address the intellectual, political, and social elements of the subsequent incarnation of this debate through the inevitably politicized content and aesthetics of their work.

Modernism, like so many things, is often loosely regarded as a binary between conservative and liberal, romanticist or classical, fascist or progressive. Reclaiming T.E. Hulme's theories that extend far beyond proto-Imagism to speak to his anxieties about the need for an increasingly conservative approach to crafting a religious, anti-humanist, and democratic social order places him far right of the Bloomsbury Set, yet also distances him from Pound and others who would align themselves with futurism and fascism. Situating modernist production within the spectrum of political views illuminated by Hulme's work demonstrates the extent to which the fabric of modernism, however centered around questions of representation in relation with anxieties about the rapidity of change, was comprised of moving pieces in which networks of friends and opponents were constantly, though not always consciously, defining each other, the collective social order, and fragments of a modernity that we've so long insisted upon as singularly whole.

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