



**AMERICAN MODERNISM:
THE FRENCH CONNECTION
(diary of a work)
from February to April 1988
by Alfred Carol**

American Literature
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This work is dedicated to all people that contributed to its achievement, specially to those of my classmates who very kindly encouraged me throughout the whole process, and whose critical opinion I had more or less in mind as I was writing.

*En cest sonet coind'e leri
fauc motz e capuig e doli,
e serant verai e cert
quan n'aurai passat la lima;
—Arnaut Daniel*

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by Alfred Carol

Down the stairs of 125 Via Augusta, Barcelona 08006, Institut d'Estudis Nord-americanos, the "Annex"; going up to Muntaner subway station:

- ¿Ya has pensado el trabajo de este trimestre?
- Sí, será sobre una de las "short stories" de "Winesburg, Ohio". Ya me estoy documentando.
- Ah! Claro una de esas cuyos personajes dice Michael que no tienen nada dentro, que carecen de pasión en la vida. Estoy seguro que le sacarás partido; está en la línea de las situaciones sombrías en las que te gusta hincar el bisturí.
- ¡No me digas! ¿y tú qué vas a hacer? ¿lo tienes ya decidido?
- Pues sí, va a ser algo sobre las relaciones entre el modernismo poético norteamericano y algunos poetas franceses que lo precedieron o que le fueron cuasi contemporáneos.
- ¡Anda pues!
- No, mira, suena como ambicioso pero voy a hacer algo sin pretensiones, al alcance de mis moderadas posibilidades: intentar seguir algunas pistas y reforzar al mismo tiempo mi conocimiento de las vanguardias poéticas francesas de estos tiempos. No hay que olvidar que Pound en su muy estricta selección de innovadores cita varios poetas franceses, y no de los más clásicos a menudo: Rimbaud - bueno, ese si que es clásico -, Laforgue, Corbières, Remy de Gourmont y un corto etcétera; otros empezaron sus experiencias con una rara sincronización respecto a los norteamericanos: Apollinaire y Blaise Cendrars (but for the latter I get the information later on) por ejemplo, cuyas primeras

publicaciones significativas son simultáneas con la formación en Londres del grupo "Des Imagistes".

Pound - Rimbaud, lofty figures hungry for novelties, loving poetry; wanting it to play again the role of lantern of knowledge, to express what had not yet been expressed. They shared a sharp criticism against their predecessors in poetry.

Says Rimbaud:

"De la Grèce au mouvement romantique - moyen âge - il y a des lettrés, des versificateurs, tout est prose rimée, un jeu, avachissement et gloire d'innombrables générations d'idiots.... Du reste, libre aux *nouveaux* d'exéquer les ancêtres...."

And Pound echoes:

"After Villon, and having begun before this time, we find this *fioritura*, and for centuries we find little else, Even in Marlowe and Shakespeare there is this embroidery of language, this talk about the matter, rather than presentation...."(p 29).

(*at home*)

I look up my shelves in order to gather what books I may have on the subject. They amount to : Rimbaud, "Oeuvres", éditions Broceliandre; Apollinaire, "Alcools" and "Calligrammes"; Baudelaire, "Les Fleurs du Mal"; and giving a "vue d'ensemble", the four volumes of "La Poésie Française aux XIXème et XXème siècle" by Robert Sabatier. That seems a lot to me at this moment, however I realize that I have nothing on Laforgue and that I know very little about Cendrars. I will fill up these gaps in my next trip to Paris, I hope. So, I start with Rimbaud and Apollinaire, both more or less at the same time, reading and taking notes; several books and papers spread on the table:

"Baudelaire est le premier voyant, roi des poètes un vrai Dieu. Encore a-t-il vécu dans un milieu trop artiste; et la forme si vantée en lui est mesquine: Les inventeurs d'inconnu réclament des formes nouvelles". - *Rimbaud*

Formes nouvelles! The struggle for new forms will be a great issue in the modernist movement. And free verse is one of the important means that convey these new forms. Baudelaire didn't use it, he stuck to traditional forms, rhymes and rhythms: musique/despotique, espoir/voir...; the number of syllables (French poetry is syllabic rather than based on stress, which means that one syllable is equal to one foot) follows fixed rigid patterns. The old sonnet, almost exhausted, is still there, in "Les Fleurs du Mal":

(from "La destruction")

"Sans cesse à mes côtés s'agite le Démon;
Il nage autour de moi comme un air impalpable;
Je l'avale et le sens qui brûle mon poumon
Et l'emplit d'un désir éternel et coupable."

and the alexandrine, "à la Racine" is not yet dead:

(from "Beatrice")

"La reine de mon coeur au regard non pareil,
Qui riait avec eux de ma sombre détresse
Et leur versait parfois quelque sale caresse"

Pound's opinion on Baudelaire's weakness is even worse; it seems exaggerated to our present sensitiveness. He gives his opinion in a somehow indirect way by quoting Henry James: " 'Le Mal?' we exclaim; you do yourself too much honour. This is not the Evil; it is not the wrong; it is simply the nasty! Our impatience is of the same order as that which we should feel if a poet, pretending to pluck 'The flowers of God', should come and present us, as specimens, rhapsody of plum-cake and *Eau de Cologne*." (p308).

Rimbaud claims he despises stiff poetic forms. Nevertheless in his first works (i.e.: "Le Bateau Ivre", written in classic alexandrines),

"Comme je descendais des Fleuves impassibles,
Je ne me sentis plus guidé par les haleurs:
Des Peaux-Rouges criards les avaient pris pour cibles,
Les ayant cloués nus aux poteaux de couleurs."

rhyme schemes remain very conventional, *abab*, and normally (there are few exceptions: *doux/genoux*, *mur/azur*) words rhyme in a "riche" way (vowel plus preceding consonant). It is not till the poems he wrote after his Parisian period of debauch, that rhyme becomes looser and looser: *villageoises/noisetiers* (Larmes), while in "Bannières de Mai" it almost completely vanishes:

"Aux branches claires des tilleuls
Meurt un maladif hallali
Mais des chansons spirituelles
Voltigent parmi les groseilles"

Anyway, whatever happens to his rhyme, Rimbaud's verse remains strongly dependent on classic rules. As Mallarmé said: "Ni la liberté allouée au vers ou, mieux, jaillie telle par miracle, ne se réclamera de qui fut, a part le balbutiement des tous derniers poèmes ou quand il cessa, un strict observateur du jeu ancien." That opinion is acceptable as long as Rimbaud's "Poèmes" are concerned, still there is "Les Illuminations"

*"Les chars d'argent et de cuivre -
Les proues d'acier et d'argent -
Battent l'écume, -
Soulevent les souches des ronces.
Et les ornières immenses du reflux,
Filent circulairement vers l'est,
Vers les piliers de la forêt, -
Vers les fûts de la jetée*

the last Rimbaud's work, written in poetical prose, which... A minute! a further analysis of Rimbaud's poetics is beyond my reach. Let me only point out the influence that a poem like "Le bateau ivre" had! -It turned to a mythical point of reference in modern poetry; something like "Leaves of Grass"-. And, to finish, couldn't Rimbaud ("Les Illuminations") have inspired Pound directly? Compare, then, the following fragment of Canto XVII to the "Marine" quoted above:

"There in the forest of marble,
the stone trees - out of water -
the harbours of stone -
.....
silver, steel over steel,
silver beaks rising and crossing"

The war, Apollinaire went to it:

"Le ciel est étoilé par les obus des Boches
la forêt merveilleuse ou je vis donne un bal
La mitrailleuse joue un air à triples-croches"

Unbelievable! He is crazy! War is nothing but a feast to him: "Aux créneaux! aux créneaux! laissez les pioches!" he urges the "fantassins". How not to be reminded, by contrast, of Georg Trakl! The Austrian poet who died -was it not suicide?- of overdose at the beginning of the war. He said in his last poem written after the battle of Grodek:

"O stolzere Trauer! ihr ehernen Altäre
Die laisse Flamme des Geistes nährt heute ein
gewaltiger Schmerz
Die ungeborenen Enkel"

Oh mourning full of pride! Altars of brass
The burning flame of the spirit feeds today

an immense grief.

The unborn offspring's.

World War I struck American modernists strongly. They reacted against it in different ways according to their sensitivity: Eliot, seeing his world and the values of what he thought was his civilization falling apart, went into that marvelous example of mourning chant that is "The Waste Land". The form is now liberated from all the old rules, the poem attains a kind of perfect balance between suggestion and incoherence. Pound gave a horrible picture of the war in his Canto XVI (one of the Hell's Cantos):

"Mais ces pauvres types

A la fin y s'attaquaient pour manger,

Sans ordres, les bêtes sauvages,..."

but Pound at this moment, was aware of the fact that something new grew in the ruins of the war: The Soviet Revolution!:

"...Ordered 'em to fire into the crowd

in the square at the end of the Nevsky,

In front of Moscow station

.....

And that was the revolution..."

"Ladies and Gentlemen in a few minutes we shall be landing at Paris Airport Orly. Outside temperature is five degrees Celsius. Captain ... and his crew... in our lines". I wonder whether the attitude of Apollinaire towards the war was common among French writers or if, on the contrary, he was seriously opposed. The same evening at dinner I ask Nadia, my niece -she will graduate in French Literature from Nanterre University this year-, the questions that haunted my spirit:

- Oh, bien sur que ce fut perçu comme une attitude très choquante à l'époque.

Elle souleva des critiques de plusieurs côtés. Notamment Blaise Cendrars, son

ami et collègue, sur qui Apollinaire avait pris modèle dans certains de ces poèmes, lui reprocha vertement le ton de ses poèmes de guerre; tant et si fort que ce fut la fin de leur amitié.

- Ah, bon....

- Attends, je vais te chercher...

-...!

- Tiens, regarde ici dans "La main coupée", ce que dit Cendrars:

"...ces pauvres petits pioupious en pantalon rouge garance oubliés dans l'herbe, faisaient des tâches aussi nombreuses mais pas plus importantes que des bouses de vache dans un pré."

and later on:

"-'Maman! maman!...' que poussent les hommes blessés à mort qui tombent et que l'on abandonne entre les lignes après une attaque qui a échoué et que l'on reflue en désordre"

- Parfait, c'est ce qu'il me faut. Tu peux me le prêter, ce livre?

- Ah non! désolée, je suis en train de travailler dessus; mais t'en fais pas, je t'enverrai de photocopies par la poste.

I wish I could have some spare time tomorrow to go to the FNAC before my flying back to Barcelone. Cendrars and Laforgue are on the short list (and Rilke also, but for different reasons).

(forum des Halles)

- Est-ce que je peux déposer ma valise ici, à la consigne, Monsieur?

- Eh non, c'est trop gros, vous pouvez la garder avec vous.

- Mais...précisément je veux pas la garder, ça va m'embarrasser pour chercher les livres!

- Je n'y peux rien mon bon Monsieur, ce sont les normes.

After a long corridor, at the poetry section, on the shelf of letter L, the book of Laforgue shines blue. I had never seen a poetry book cobalt blue like this. I take it in my hand, the back jacket reads:

"Jules Laforgue et Tristan Corbière dans nombre de ses poèmes sont plus proches de l'école de Donne que n'importe lequel des poètes modernes anglais"

T.S. Eliot

I remember that Pound has a whole essay dedicated to Laforgue: "Irony, Laforgue, and some Satire". When we look into it we find:

"Laforgue is not like any preceding poet.....

without familiarity with Laforgue one can not appreciate certain positives and negatives in French poetry since 1890".

Laforgue is far from being one of the most popular French poets. He was and he remains in a certain way a "poète Maudit". He died young at 26, of consumption, in miserable condition, and his wife, a young English woman -Leah Lee- died some months later of the same disease.

Laforgue might have been, I'm afraid, more appreciated by the group of Anglo/American Modernists -we have already seen how Eliot and Pound praised him- than by his French contemporaries and successors. He was celebrated as a great star by some of his young fellow poets -Remy de Gourmont, Saint Pol Roux, Maeterlink- but later on, French artists at the turn of the century despised him with anger; to the point that one day, in the early Teens, Max Jacob, Picasso and Apollinaire went down the streets of Montmartre shouting:

"A bas Rimbaud! A bas Laforgue!"

(by the way, would you imagine a scene like that nowadays?)

To the readers of our present time, Jules Laforgue means without a doubt, like any other poet, fascination.

See:

"Ton geste

hourï

M'a l'air d'un *memento mori*"

Qui signifie au fond: va, reste...

He meant, as he said, to express himself in the "immediacy", out of the "first burst",
or:

"Oh! Quelle nuit d'étoiles, quelles Saturnales!

Oh mais des galas inconnus

Dans les annales

Sidérales

Bref, un ciel absolument nu!"

where he makes poetry be a "divagation of images in a dream or in unconscious ecstasy".

These ideas couldn't fail to strike the group of poets gathered around Pound in London, trying to find new forms for the exhausted English poetry. In fact, the impact was so considerable that they named their new movement, "Vorticism", after a device taken out of a Laforgue's poem:

"(lune) Vortex nombril

de tout nihil"

We have to keep in mind that the poets we are talking about, American Modernists as well as French Avant-garde, made a point of knowing poetry written in other languages and then, translating it into their own language. That is not only true, and very well known for Pound, who translated from Classic Provençal, Old Italian, etc., and inserted long passages written in French into his Cantos (ie. Canto XVI), but also for Eliot who wrote at least one poem in French, "Dans le Restaurant". Laforgue, who was familiar with English language because of his wife, quoted Shakespeare several times, i.e. at the beginning of "Des fleurs de bonne volonté":

"Hamlet exit.

Ophelia: O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown

.....

Hamlet: Had I but time....

O, I could tell you,

But let it be."

Besides, from the fact that he translated Walt Whitman into French, we may deduce that the wide use of free verse in Whitman's work was of some influence in Laforgue's progressive inclination towards "vers libre" and rhythmical research:

"La femme,
mon âme:
Ah! quels
Appels!

Pastels
Mortels,
Qu'on blâme
mes gemmes!

This is the kind of stanza that Doctor Williams (William Carlos) would not have rejected had he known of it, which I can not assert.

Look at this piece of early poetry from W.C.W that can be easily connected to Laforgue (from "Postlude"):

"Your hair is my Carthage
and my arms the bow,
and our words arrows
to shoot the stars."

A letter arrives:

Mr. A. Carol French stamp
of 3,70 F

54-58 calle Bonaplata
08034 Barcelona
Espagne

"Mon cher Fredi

Je t'envoie deux petits extraits de la main coupée, écrit entre 1944 et
1946, mais, concernant la première guerre mondiale. J'espère qu'ils
feront ton bonheur

A bientôt

Nadia"

enclosed are the copies of pp 427, 552, 553, 554, which I give in an annex to this work.

"April is the cruellest month, breeding / lilacs.." (T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land").

April 1912, Blaise Cendrars is in New York wandering like a bum, living in a squalid
room:

"Seigneur la foule des pauvres pour qui vous faites le sacrifice
Est ici, parquée, tassée, comme du bétail, dans les hospices.

D'immenses bateaux noirs viennent des horizons
Et les débarquent, pêle-mêle, sur les pontons.

Il y a des Italiens, des Grecs, des Espagnols,

Des Russes, des Bulgars, des Persans, des Mongols.
Ce sont des bêtes de cirque qui sautent les méridiens.
On leur jette un morceau de viande noire, comme à des chiens

C'est leur bonheur à eux que cette sale pitance
Seigneur, ayez pitié des peuples en souffrance"

"Les Pâques à New-York" made the effect of an explosion into the panorama of French poetry. It has been said that it is "a monument, the point from which French poetry took its best elements for the renewal". With this poem Naturalism enters French poetry, the style is direct, open; sometimes sharp and harsh, always dominated by the free spirit and sincerity. For the first time, scenes taken out of real, pitiful life are included in a poem:

"Je descends les mauvaises marches d'un café
Et me voici, assis, devant un verre de thé.

Je suis chez les chinois, qui comme avec le dos
Sourient, se penchent et sont polis comme des magots

La boutique est petite, badigeonnée de rouge
Et de curieux chromos sont encadrées dans du bambou"

Notice that the poem is already written in verses of irregular meter -from 10 to 15 syllables- more or less rhymed in pairs.

"Pâques à New York" was immediately followed by the even more revolutionary "Prose du Transiberien":

"En ce temps-là j'étais en mon adolescence

J'avais à peine seize ans et je ne me souvenais
deja plus de mon enfance
J'étais à 16.000 lieues du lieu de ma naissance
J'étais à Moscou....."

Here the freedom evoked by the contents is supported by a complete liberation in the form. No rhyme scheme is noticeable, rhythms are variable and adapted to every situation. With Cendrars, poetry is once again in-line with real life and contemporary art; it reaches a level of representation that matches the expectations of its time. The vow of Pound, "to make poetry compete with prose in the field of literary expression" is being fulfilled.

The wheels of the recorder turn effortlessly; it's the voice of my son that comes out of the reel, pouring with soft and emotive inflections:

"A Bacharach il y avait une sorciere blonde
Qui laissait mourir d'amour tous les hommes à la ronde

Devant son tribunal l'évêque la fit citer..."

-Però, què és això, Riel?

-Vès, és una poesia de l'Apollinaire que ens han dit de gravar a l'escola, "La Loreley",
es diu.

-Conills!

"...D'avance il l'absolvit à cause de sa beauté
O belle Loreley....."

God! Apollinaire and he is only thirteen!

As you can see, Apollinaire is by any standards the most popular among the French poets of the period. He is the poetic wing of the "esprit nouveau". It is considered that he was to poetry, what Picasso with his Cubism was to painting.

Apollinaire, "Alcools", -every characteristic element of the Modernist poetry is already present in this book: recreation through translation -like in the "Loreley" just mentioned (translated from a poetry of Brentanos); the use of old medieval forms and rhythms, like in the "Chanson du mal-aimé":

"Je suivis ce mauvais garçon
Qui sifflotait mains dans les poches
Nous semblions entre maisons
Onde ouverte de la mer Rouge
Lui les Hebreux moi Pharaon"

which is inspired on the rhythms of François Villon and is to be connected with the attention paid by Pound to Classic Provençal poetry, or by Eliot to the "Divina Comedia"; the writing of very short poems, sort of "Images", like "Chantre", a one-line poem: "Et l'unique cordeau des trompettes marines". It is worth noticing that the first poem of "Alcools", "Zone", consciously marks the border between the "New" and the "Old":

"A la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien
Bergère ô tour Eiffel le troupeau des ponts bêle ce matin
Tu en as assez de vivre dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine"

A closer inspection of the poem shows that there is no punctuation in it, like there will not be any punctuation in W. Carlos Williams' poems later on. Furthermore, when we look at people in "Zone", we discover they are "les directeurs et les belles steno dactylographes", real working men and women, like the "typist home at tea time..." in Eliot's "The Waste Land" (except we are not sure that she is "belle" in Eliot's setting). While "Zone" is a poem of explicit Christianity, "Seul en Europe tu n'est pas antique ô Christianisme", references to religion and Christianity, although not uncommon, are much more subtle in Eliot:

(from "Four Quartets")
"The association of man and woman

In daunsinge, signifyng matrimonie -

A dignified and commodious sacrament."

If we keep reading "Alcools", we find out that the coarseness in language, so rude in Pound's Hell Cantos:

"The great scabrous arse-hole, shit-ting flies,
rumbling with imperialisme,
ultimate urinal, middan, piswallow without a cloaca"

had a challenging previous example in Apollinaire's "Cosaques Zaporogues":

"Des plaies, des ulcères, des croûtes
Groin de cochon cul de jument
Tes richesses garde les toutes
Pour payer tes médicaments"

and going back in time several years more, we learn,

"Les anciens animaux saillaient, même en course
Avec des glands bardés de sang et excrement.
Nos pères étalaient leur membre fierement
Par le pli de la gaine et le grain de la bourse."

according to Rimbaud's "Stupra", a collection of poems that he himself called "obscenes".

.....

"Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many
I had not thought dead had undone so many,"
("The burial of the dead", T.S.Eliot)

Death, time, dead people out of the past. Or going back into the past to meet dead people; the replay of events happened far ago, or that will happen. American modernists were very much concerned by the human issues implied in time, as time is the main variable on which life and history are dependent (no wonder if at the same periode Einstein worked in the scientific aspects of time, for Einstein should be considered the scientific wing of modernism). The problem about time, that worries a lot of people, is that mathematically speaking it appears as a monotonous growing variable. Therefore, a historical event or a situation in human life can never be reenacted. Nature, through its cycle of seasons, tries to trick that reality, making time appear as a succession of repetitions; but the new springtime will always be different from the previous (and even if the Big-Bang theory were true, a new Bang will also be different from the previous).

Poets, working in a world of fiction, are allowed to investigate what would or could happen if time were liberated from its constraints.

Apollinaire was not only a form-breaker, but was also interested in the time-life-death speculation. Let us consider his "Maison des morts":

"Arrivé de Munich depuis quinze ou vingt jours
J'étais entré pour la première fois et par hasard
Dans ce cimetière presque désert
Et je claquais des dents
Devant toute cette bourgeoisie
Exposée et même le mieux possible
En attendant la sepulture"

The wandering in town of the dead and the alive mixed together, the simultaneity of people belonging to different ages, makes for the abolition of time in a way similar to that suggested by Eliot in the previous quotation (incidentally Eliot developed much more his ideas on time in his later work, "Four Quartets").

Once more the poem of Apollinaire does not lack formal interest, for, as we see, it begins with a description very close to prose style.

Apollinaire and Cendrars worked together at the "Bibliothèque Nationale", Apollinaire's "Zone" came soon after Cendrars' "Pâques à New-York", and ...

Apollinaire-Cendrars, Cendrars-Apollinaire, who was first? Anyway they made up a binomial that settled French poetry, both stylistically and conceptually, in the land of modernity.

(stopping at Muntaner-Via Augusta, the City literary crossing)

- Com ho tens lo del treball, Lluís?

- Doncs home sí, ja ho tinc tot embastat: es tracta d'una mena de reencarnació de William Faulkner a Comala, el poble de Pedro Páramo.

- ¡...!

- Res, és que he volgut fer una cosa que m'agradés, saps?

- Sí, jo també he volgut fer una cosa que em vingués de gust, i se m'ha inflat com un bunyol. Ja vaig per la pagina XXII y tot just començo a entreveure el final. A més no se si encaixa massa amb lo que s'espera el Michael, però saps què? En passo una mica, vaig a la meva.

- Claro, haceis bien, de todas maneras la mayoría de escritores -los que no miran solo el lado comercial, vamos- escriben para su propia satisfacción, sin tener en cuenta lo que pueda esperar el público, no creéis?

- Seguramente, de cualquier modo nos gusta contar con tu apoyo.

During this period of the early Teens there were a lot of direct connections, similarities and parallel developments between the group of Pound in London and the French "Avantgarde" in Paris. French writers like Paul Morand and Jean de Boschère lived in London for a while, and were in touch with Pound's "entourage". On the other hand, while "Futurisme" led by the Franco-Italian Marinetti, agitated the London artistic atmosphere, Cubisme and "esprit nouveau" were the artistic "mots d'ordre" in Paris.

The first anthology of the Anglo-american modernists "Les Imagistes" appeared in 1914, Cendrars' "Pâques à New York" was published in 1912, and Apollinaire's "Alcools" in 1913.

The events that marked the beginning of Modernism in London and Paris were close in time and linked by some of their protagonists. But, even though Pound had already published his "Personae" in 1910, we must accept that Paris was the motor driving and pulling the movement; that the Paris' team organized around

the "Bateau Lavoir", Picasso, Max Jacob, Apollinaire, Braque, etc., had a more specific weight than the people gathered around "Poetry" in London. Paris was, at that moment, the artistic center of the world, and the other artistic places looked to Paris for guidelines.

"My true Penelope was Flaubert" -Pound "Mauberley"

"Modernists are conscious of the text", says Michael. Ok, what does it mean? A first conclusion to be legitimately drawn is that writers before that time were not conscious of the text or, what is almost the same, that they produced texts unconscious of the conditions and destinations of their works or, more exactly, that they accepted -without questioning- the conditions already settled for their literary production. In a similar way contemporary painters (pre-modernist painters) made paintings destined to hang on the walls of the drawing-rooms of the bourgeoisie.

"La poésie, avec ses comparaisons obligées, sa mythologie que ne croit pas le poète, sa dignité de style à la Louis XIV, et tout l'attirail de ses ornements appelés poétiques, est bien au-dessous de la prose dès qu'il s'agit de donner une idée claire et précise des mouvements du coeur; or dans ce genre, on n'émeut que par la clarté" -*Sthendal*

This quotation, included by Pound in his essay "The Serious Artist", expresses the main concern of poets coming after Sthendal and the French prose of the XIXth century. No doubt that people like Rimbaud, Laforgue, Apollinaire, felt uncomfortable in a situation where poetry was considered a superfluous activity, a sort of "de luxe" product to be hung in the mental shelves of leisured people (but it will not be easy to come around this problem in modern poetry). It was clear to all of them that forms should be broken down in order to make a new poetry come out of the parched skin of conventional style.

The breakdown of old forms would allow poets to build up new kinds of poems gathering materials not used till that moment in poetry; and that mainly from two sources: one was the tangible reality of the world known by the poet - letting the smoke of the factories get into poems-, the other was the exploration of the unconscious, either of the individual, or of the collectivity.

Progressing in that way poetry tended towards a totality, a system able to encompass every aspect of life. Poetry (and art in general) didn't want to be a piece of the social device any more; on the contrary it wanted to place itself in an outside dominating position, from which it would give an account of the whole thing. The way it turned out, poetry started walking on the grounds normally belonging to science.

It was not clear whether science and poetry (art) were competing, or if poetry was just trying to complement science using means that were beyond the reach of the latter. One thing is sure anyway, poetry succeeded in its purpose of expressing "what had not yet been expressed". But another thing happened as a matter of consequence: in their aim for totality poems grew difficult to understand. The complexity of structures and the variety of components, asked readers for a thoughtful reflection in order to enjoy all the richness contained in such poems.

At the same time, literary works also fell under the scope of study of modernist poets. And they took not only poems written in the past by other people, but the poem itself that the poet was actually writing.

So, as modernists included art and their own works into their field of speculation, poetry got entangled with itself in a way that might have led to a dead lock.

Happily, the best of modernist works in poetry reached a perfect balance between their "consciousness of the text" and their longing for totality.

They put art -specially poetry, which has very little commercial value- in a position where it had never been before, in a position where poetry came to be one of the main keys of knowledge in modern times.

(lunch time, talking to Nadine -my wife)

- J'ai viens de finir mon travail. J'ai basé l'étude sur Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Cendrars et Apollinaire.

- Alors, t'es impardonnable. T'aurais du parler de Verlaine qui a beaucoup fait pour le vers moderne.

Il a écrit:

"De la musique avant toute chose

et pour cela préfère l'Impair..."

- Dis donc! Je ne pouvais tout de même pas aborder toute la poésie Française! Il fallait bien me limiter; avec Verlaine c'était tout le symbolisme qui s'amenait. Ça sera pour la prochaine fois.

Sarrià, Abril del 1988

Michael's appreciation: A+

Well written and researched.

Thanks a lot for your essay-diary-excerpt. It's been a while since I've thought about the connection between American Modernism and French Modernism. The origins are there, but there seems to be certain lacune in your analysis. The concern with the text, or better said, with language; itself is part of the problem. How do we write what we write? Like Kant's point of departure: "how do we know what we know?" Modernism is an age where linguistics dominates philosophy, even in a certain sense those poets are forced outside of society and relations of power. The linguistic-textual obsession is both cause and effect.

ANNEX I: "La main coupée" -Blaise Cendrars (fragments sent by Nadia Chabaneix)

ANNEX II: Quotations on reader-writer relationship

"The Paris Review Interviews"

William Gass interviewed by Thomas leClair, Summer 1977. ("Writers at Work")

-Interviewer: Is the reader an adversary of you?

-Gass: No, I don't think much about the reader. Ways of reading are adversaries
- Those theoretical ways. As far as writing something is concerned, the reader really doesn't exist. the writer's business is somehow to create in the work something which will stand on its own and make its own demands; and if the writer is good, he discovers what those demands are, and he meets them, and creates this thing which readers can then do what they like with. Gertrude Stern said, "I write for myself and strangers," and then eventually she said that she wrote only for herself. I think she should have taken one further step. You don't write for anybody. People who send you bills do that. People who want to tell you things so they can sell you things so they can send you bills do that. You are advancing an art -the art. That is what you are trying to do.

Joseph Keller, interviewed by George Plimpton, winter 1974 ("Writers at Work")

-Interviewer: Do you have an audience you keep in mind when you work?

-Keller: Since writing is really performing for people unconsciously I must have an audience I'm writing for - someone who is really me, I suppose, with my degree of sensibility, my level of education, my interest in literature... .

Joan Didian, interviewed by Linda Kuel, August 1977 ("Writers at Work")

-Int: Are you conscious of the reader as you write? Do you write listening to the reader listening to you?

-J.D.: Obviously I write to a reader, but the only reader I hear is me. I am always writing to myself. So very possibly I'm committing an aggressive and hostile act toward myself.

(J.D. has said that writing is an hostile act)

(off the record: is there any projection of that, in Faulkner's "Go down Moises"?
Remember his mourning refrain, "I lost my Benjamin, the Pharao got him")