

## **Assignment: Reviews of Modernists and Modernists as Reviewers**

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**Rationale for the Assignment:** This assignment comes from a survey course called *The Modernist Tradition* that I teach to 35 undergraduates (mostly juniors and seniors); the literature we study extends from the 1890s to 1945 and primarily includes works by British, Irish, and American authors, though we also read some French, Italian, and Spanish texts in translation. We do this assignment about midway through the course, when we've just discussed the significance of 1922 (which makes the upper end of the MJP archive valuable to us). My idea is to use periodicals—and the MJP in particular—to supplement, contextualize, and offer inroads into understanding the mostly canonical figures that we study in the course. Students are accustomed to thinking of authors, especially canonical ones, as solitary geniuses who only wrote creative fiction. A glimpse of any figure's letters, essays, or diaries can help them push beyond this idea, but I've had great success recently encouraging students to see modernist writers (1) as book reviewers and (2) as reviewed authors. By concentrating on both, this assignment can help clarify why, for example, Eliot was drawn to Baudelaire and what that meant in his moment; why *Poetry* was alternately positive and negative about Eliot's work; why the writers in *BLAST* aren't as enamored with Marinetti's Futurism as one might think (or why the *New Age* calls it an "artistic canker"); or what Pound's cultural politics looked like before his fascism. The students also come across materials that are truly surprising (to me as well as them), such as disagreements and rivalries among leading figures that productively complicate the issues and trends we've been discussing. Overall, this assignment helps students see modernism in an unfamiliar way by showing it emerging in its multiple contexts and amidst contestation.

The assignment appears on the next page.

## Reviews of Modernists and Modernists as Reviewers

In this assignment, we will be studying modernists as reviewers and as authors being reviewed. Your task is to find between one and three reviews—how many depends on how long and substantive your examples are—and then write a two-page summary and analysis of the texts. You'll want to relate the reviews to the discussions we've had thus far in the course, and then push those discussions forward in your analysis of the claims, connections, language, and other elements of the piece(s) you've chosen. Think broadly in this assignment; a half-hour of searching the MJP database will yield some incredible results.

**Questions to consider:** How does the reviewer evaluate the reviewed text? What assumptions does s/he make about literature and aesthetics? What sort of appeals to tradition, innovation, originality, or celebrity? What, according to the reviewer, succeeds or fails in the author's work(s), and why? If the author is one we've read, does the review make sense within the discussions we've had, or does it diverge from it—and why? Do the reviewer's claims seem similar to contemporary judgments, whether academic or not, about the evaluated work?

**How to locate book reviews in the MJP database [quoted from the MJP search help page]:** "There is no single foolproof way to locate all book reviews (and other reviews) in the MJP journals, in part because these items are often not well marked in the magazines and are hard to classify accurately. However, if you use the advanced metadata search page and search for an author while selecting 'Articles' as the Genre, you should get all of that author's book reviews; and if you do a title search for the title and/or author of a book, you should get any reviews of that book. You can also combine the two: e.g., if you do an advanced metadata search for Pound as Author and Eliot as Title, you will locate Pound's book review of Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations*. Finally, title searches that include the terms 'Book Review' will locate many reviews, though not all of them." We'll do a tutorial on this in class.

**Suggestions to get you started:** Think through the many names, texts, and movements we've discussed already this term. Here are a few reminders:

*Authors we've read (many of them read one another, remember):* Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Pater, Wilde, Proust, Conrad, Ford, Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Pound, Lewis, Marinetti, Lowell, Williams, Benjamin, West. Search for titles and for famous characters from their works, too (Marlow or Stephen Dedalus, for example).

*Famous authors to whom we've seen allusions and/or references:* Homer, Dante, Virgil, Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Dickens, Dickinson, Whitman, Tennyson, Kipling

*Movements we've studied and/or discussed:* Impressionism, Futurism, Cubism, Imagism, Vorticism (Think of keywords, too, like "machine," "tradition," "cinema," or "avant-garde")