

When Did Modernism Begin? Formulating Boundaries in the Modern Anthology

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BLANDNESS AND STRUGGLE, AT TIMES, CO-EXIST in odd settings. The modern poetry anthology, for example—its introductions are both the site of the blandest prose ever written in English, as well as a passionate struggle over the boundaries of an archive. As the place where aesthetic principles were articulated and the boundaries of the archive delineated, the introductions to anthologies are not made up of very promising writing. Their bland conventionality fairly leaps out at one. All anthologies make similar, generalized noises in their prefatory remarks. They articulate their unimpeachable aesthetic standards and grumble about what they have had to omit. They make general claims for a catholicity of taste, and for the value of poetry now being written. Many make nervous sounds about copyright.

But within their bland prefaces modern poetry anthologies also record a struggle about an emergent entity and the conditions under which that entity—which became known as modernism—might be known, represented, and archived. The struggle was all the more passionate because the first generation of modern anthologies represented a literary period that was still under construction, that was still producing poetry. The site of an awkward, self-conscious struggle over its principles of inclusion, the

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modern poetry anthology, anxious not to appear arbitrary, could not leave its organizing principles alone. Particularly anxious about when modernism began, modern anthologies come up with competing claims: in 1870, or with those born after 1840, or with Whitman, or with Hopkins—or even William Ernest Henley, perhaps. The dates change with editors' commitments to various ideological definitions of modernism, and so at times modernism begins in France with Baudelaire, or with the *Georgian* anthologies (5 vols., 1912–22), or with Chicago's *Poetry* magazine (1912–).

Now, trying to decide which of these starting points correctly locates the beginning of modernism probably leads only to naively empirical coffee-room chat. It is more productive to redirect the question, to look at what is at stake when one claims that modernism *began*. Such an approach commences by looking at how anthologists' uncertainty about dates manifests itself. Harold Monro, in his 1929 edition of *Twentieth Century Poetry*, is typical both in his assertiveness and his hedging: "The name of the book should not be accepted too literally. Its intention is to cover the whole of our own period. What then is *our* Period? Chronological Pedantry would naturally confine it within certain decades.... Certain chronological boundaries were necessary, though as arbitrary as possible." This was not a comfortable principle for Monro; "arbitrariness" was not enough. A page later he finds it necessary to justify including Hopkins, whose dates appear outside the anthology's chronological range. Argues Monro: "But Chronology may now be dropped, he [Hopkins] belonging temperamentally and technically to the Twentieth Century, not to the Nineteenth" (7, 8). There is anxiety about claiming temporal boundaries, since under the pressure of creating a satisfactory archive of poetry—one with principles of inclusion and exclusion that do not limit themselves to the chronological—they inevitably became fuzzy.

But Monro's is not *just* an anthologist's nuts-and-bolts anxiety about including or excluding individual names; his anxiety (like that of all modern anthologists) is tied to the principles of inclusion themselves, to history, to modernism as an event. Directed at the principles that individual names represent, Monro's anxiety reveals that, in order to understand modernism's origins and how these anthologies constructed modernism as a concept, we need to flip the question from one of *production* to one of *reception*. The question is not about when modern poems were first produced; rather, the question is more fruitfully asked about what the conditions were that first made it possible to think of modernism as an event. When the conceptual problem is understood in this way, it becomes clear that modernism began when certain kinds of thinking became possible, when it was possible to

think of modernism as an entity separate from what preceded it, an entity with boundaries. About *that*, the introductions to modern anthologies offer some provocative evidence, presenting a record of how anthologists understood the beginnings of modernism—and, of course, how they nudged their readers' understandings of these beginnings. Those understandings of modernism's beginnings reveal tensions that extend to the close of modernism as well, and to whatever may have succeeded it.

This anxiety about anthology-making was new, for anthology production changed between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nineteenth-century anthologies were overwhelmingly of the “gems” variety, sporting such titles as *Fifty Perfect Poems* (1883), *A Thousand and One Gems of English Poetry* (1867), *The Golden Pomp* (1895), *The Young Man's Book of Elegant Poetry* (1835), and *Nightingale Valley* (1860). Palgrave's 1861 *Golden Treasury*, of course, is the best-known example. These are anthologies whose poems were collected on vague aesthetic principles, and whose structure was unhistoricized.¹ William Allingham's *Nightingale Valley* is typical:

The intention of this book simply is to delight the lover of poetry. Specimens critical and chronological have their own worth; we desire to present a jewel, aptly arranged of many stones, various in colour and value, but all precious.... Much, it is true, is perforce omitted; but should the brotherly reader and the judicious critic haply find the little volume, *per se*, a good thing, they will scarcely complain that it does but its part. Do we curse the cup of refreshing handed us from the well because it is not twice as large—when the well itself, too, remains? Those who best know of such things will the most readily see that a collection in any sense complete or exhaustive has not been thought of here, but an arrangement of a limited number of short poems, with some eye to grouping and general effect, and to the end (as said) of delight. (v)

The archival issues are here defined quite differently than they would be in the twentieth century. In many ways, the gems anthology owes less of its conceptual structure to the idea of the archive than it does to that of the *Wunderkammer*. Because the purpose of the gems anthology was premised

1 Other typical titles include *A Treasury of Minor British Poetry* (1896), *A Household Book of Poetry* (1858), *The Book of Gems* (1836), and *The Beauties of the Poets* (1782). See Anne Ferry's *Tradition and the Individual Poem* for a partial bibliography of nineteenth-century and earlier anthologies (279–83).

on affective principles of providing “delight,” the anxiety about inclusions to the archive was not premised on defining conceptual boundaries correctly. The anxiety was about whether enough poems were included, or whether some great poems had been left out because of genre or error. If, say, “Excelsior” had been omitted, there might be anxiety that a great poem had been overlooked, but “Excelsior” did not represent for anthologists an ideological principle, a principle that would change the nature of the anthology by that poem’s inclusion or exclusion. For modern anthologists, however, the inclusion or exclusion of Hopkins would be such an assertion. In the modern anthology the nature of the archive would change, for the modern anthology became the archive of evidence for a particular kind of argument, an argument about what made for culturally valid works of art at the beginning of the twentieth century.

As for the gems anthology, it typically presented its contents in a non-historical order, and its purposes did not encourage reflection on the relationship between chronology and ideology. Premised on pure aesthetic excellence (particularly in its emphasis on the lyric), the gems collection did not concern itself with history. It was, apparently, about unalloyed universal values, and its claims, consequently, could be both sweeping and evidence-free. The preface to the 1855 *A Gem Book of British Poetry* reads:

There is no lack of gems in the boundless mine of English poetry. English literature, beyond all others ancient or modern, abounds in ennobling thoughts. These glorious inspirations, from the great masters of song, are a part of the rich patrimony of all who speak the English tongue. They are heirlooms, which have come down to us from former generations, and which we delight to hold among our most treasured household goods. In the present volume, we have woven, as well for use as ornament, a garland of those gems of perennial beauty, consisting of the choicest extracts from the British poets, beginning with Milton, and coming down to the present day. In making these extracts, variety has been studied. Specimens will be found of almost every style, and from almost every author of distinguished note. While some of the extracts, also, are necessarily of world-wide notoriety, others not a few, though of equal brilliancy, have been taken from comparative obscurity and re-set, and, like the brilliants of the lapidary, they shine all the brighter for the freshness of their setting.

There are large claims here, but (partly because of their relentlessly metaphoric nature) they are *presented*, and not argued. Further, as historical

anthologies gained ground, the values proposed by the gems anthology—quiet pleasure, poignancy, wisdom, and so on—would no longer be foregrounded. These were eternal values, and modernism was premised on an aesthetic responsive to contemporaneity.

Thus, although the blandness of its prefaces marks it as a precursor of the modern anthology, the gems aesthetic was not *developmental*. A few presented their offerings in a majestic historical sweep, but historical anthologies—those which attempt to conceptualize a set of chronological/ideological conditions that guided the selection of poems from a single literary period—appeared late. The first Romantic anthology appeared only in 1916; the first Victorian anthology in 1895.² The twentieth century, by contrast, sees a movement in poetry anthologies away from gems and towards ideology and chronology. Moreover, the first modern anthologies occur not after the fact, as did Romantic and Victorian anthologies, but *contemporaneously* with the literature from which they drew their contents. These anthologies were a flood—around 100 modern poetry anthologies (not including the many new editions of more popular anthologies such as Untermyer’s) were published between 1900 and 1950.³

Not that these anthologies are easy to find. Modern anthologies are a problematic archive. They do not form a prestigious group—beginning

2 George Benjamin Woods edited *English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement*. (Chicago, New York: Scott, Foresman and Company) in 1916; Edmund Clarence Stedman published *A Victorian Anthology 1837–1895* (Houghton Mifflin) in 1895. In 1912 Arthur Quiller-Couch brought out *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* as one of the first titles in that press’s now-standard series of historical anthologies. Two possible exceptions to the rule suggest themselves. However, *The Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats* (Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1829) is really an omnibus volume, with separate, completely unrelated introductions for each author. A more effective exception is Robert Aris Willmott’s 1856 *Poets of the Nineteenth Century*. In this work, the editor argues for stretching the chronological range of the anthology in order to include some like-minded poets who might otherwise fall outside of the range of the anthology. However, the editor does not present the anthology’s collection as being founded on a *separation* or a difference from what had preceded it (iii).

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did see a few ambitious, chronologically arranged national anthologies. In her look at the six major national anthologies of that time, Julia Wright notes that while some anthologies used a model of disjunctive periods, a model of national development eventually came to dominate. The difference is compelling. As Wright argues, “Periods suppose disjunctive transformation, if not an antithetical movement, while the genealogical model is founded on evolutionary continuity in which the essential family characteristics (to use the term “family” in its taxonomical sense) do not change” (347).

3 For example, Robert Lynd’s *Anthology of Modern Verse* ran to 26 editions be-

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with their purchasers. Above all, the modern anthology was the personal, readymade archive of nonprofessional readers, readers who bought them either for a high school or university class, or perhaps readers who were moderately interested in poetry, but not to the extent that they were ready to commit enough money to it to buy volumes of individual poets. One anthologist, describing himself as “an ordinary lover of poetry,” wrote in defense of his craft that anthologies made poetry available to “most poetry-lovers of moderate means”: “I try to keep myself up to date in contemporary verse, but I could not afford to buy every volume of poems which is issued. I should not think of buying a book of verses from a review, unless it quoted some poem which took my fancy, but if I found some poem I liked very much in an anthology I should at once buy the works of the poet” (Gowans).⁴ Preservation of this group of books has been cursory. As a *complete* archive it is hard to track down since there is no single term for anthologies in the Library of Congress classification system. Most anthologies do not appear under the heading “Poetry (Collections),” and one cannot tell simply by its title whether a book is an anthology.⁵ The best one can do is browse the stacks in likely places, and note everything one sees. And neither is this foolproof, for research libraries are spotty in their collections—after spending two weeks in the stacks at Harvard’s Widener I found in the collection at Dalhousie anthologies that Harvard did not have. No need for provincial self-congratulation here—the discrepancy doesn’t say something laudatory about Dalhousie; it says something alarming about Harvard, and probably about every library. One cannot get a complete set of anthologies by going through a collection shelf by shelf. Even the greatest libraries in the world are spotty, and have removed anthologies from their collections as they go out of date. This archive of archives has been deaccessioned, pulped. In this process of forgetting, certain historically

tween 1921 and 1930; the school version of that anthology had 22 editions during the same time period. Louis Untermeyer’s *Modern American Poetry* had seven editions and numerous reprintings between 1919 and 1950; that anthology and his *Modern British Poetry* together sold over one million copies (Abbott 1988: 105–106).

4 Gowans was responding to letters in the *TLS* from T. S. Eliot and Robert Graves, who in the fall of 1921 complained strenuously in the *TLS* about the current flood of anthologies. Graves and Laura Riding published their *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* in 1928.

5 The term “Poetry (Collections)” is the old Library of Congress classification term, and it missed many collections while it was in use. The new terms are “American Poetry” and “English Poetry,” terms whose generality makes it almost impossible to sift through a library’s holdings on the subject.

located ways of understanding modernism have been lost. Anthologies are ephemeral archives, and that means that we have lost a complete record of the most common introduction to poetry that people have.

This record has important things to say about the construction of modernism. The dominant anthologies of the modern period, unlike those of the nineteenth century, were school anthologies. The English Association in Britain, and various high school teachers in the United States, sponsored several of these anthologies. A rise in literary study in the schools gave a market, and, along with the rise of a new professionalist literary criticism, resulted in a demand for anthologies which could address contemporary issues, and which also had an academically respectable systematization. Henry Seidel Canby, in the preface to *Twentieth-Century Poetry*, noted that “It is only in recent years that in studying English in our universities we have thought of literature as a continuous process, like the growth of an organism, proceeding with change but without cessation until the culture of which it is a part ends and is forgotten” (1929: iii).⁶

In the twentieth century, gems anthologies continued to be made, but they did not attract much attention, and did not shape aesthetic discussion the way Palgrave had in the nineteenth century. Modern anthologies were designed not to introduce individual poets or poems, or poetry with a capital P, but to introduce a movement or a time. Now, there had been periodizing before, in the great national literary histories—but this is a form of categorizing that most nineteenth-century anthologists had not found attractive. Modern anthologies, by contrast, having moved outside of a “gems” impetus, found it necessary also to justify their choices by addressing period boundaries: what sets off this moment and its best work from another. It was not conceptually useful or interesting to have that boundary be represented by a bare date. Those boundaries to the archive needed to be set by something more substantial than the mere chronology of “recentness”; they demanded principles that made it possible to argue whether something was *truly* modern. These anthologies needed some kind of conceptual justification; editors wanted their anthologies to be *coherent*, with clear principles for inclusion and exclusion, principles that justified the

6 This is not to say that literary education at even this late date looks much like it did by the 1960s. Canby goes on to assert that “Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, and Gray, who were, I believe, the first English authors to become a part of the college curriculum in the United States, could be, and were, studied as the classics are studied, textually, grammatically, historically, and for the disciplining of the mind” (iii). For accounts of the rise of English as a field of study, see Abbott (1990) and Gerald Graff (1987).

chronological range as well as the inclusion or exclusion of specific authors. The ordinary reader's introduction to poetry was increasingly systematized, and part of an argument about contemporaneity.

This additional conceptualizing had major consequences. When modern anthologists conceived of their boundaries both conceptually and temporally, they constructed modernism as a narrative. The modern anthology conceived of itself as the archive of an *event*; in modern anthologies modernism was a *response* to what had preceded it. This sense of modernism as a response resulted in a new kind of anthology in which modernism, as an aesthetic period, is presented as an agent in a narrative. This narrative made modernism possible as a concept, and when this narrative appeared, modernism—at least in the sense that it was aware of itself—began. Now, literary analysis had used narrative structure before, predominantly in the writing of literary history. As David Perkins argues, writing literary history entails selecting texts for evidence and making them “constituents of a discursive form with a beginning, a middle, and an end, if it is Aristotelean narration, or with a statement, development, and conclusion, if it is an argument” (19).⁷

The implications of a collection being a *narrative* are significant. In the first place, the anthology became a hybrid, both a collection *and* a story. With their dual characteristics, poems within the modern anthology took on the function both of aesthetic excellence and representing a time. They became overtly polemical and, in some sense, anthropological. The poems included no longer formed a smooth paste of aesthetic excellence; literary history had *moments* now, and the nature of these moments determined what would be included in the archive. Separate moments needed their boundaries defined, and in the modern anthology the present became important and needed interpretation. Ultimately, the nature of the anthology's boundaries and what motivates those boundaries changed; unlike in the gems anthologies, here the boundaries came into being as the result of historical forces and actions.

What did the modern anthology's narrative look like? It had a villain, or at least a starting impetus: modern anthologies, in their prefaces and their contents, described an aesthetic crisis that could be located in a unified past, separate from the present. About this past, there was remarkable consensus.

7 Perkins also cites Paul Ricoeur: “the role of character can be held by *whomever* or *whatever* is designated in the narrative as the grammatical subject of an action predicate in the basic narrative sentence ‘X does R’” (3).

Virtually all these anthologies—conservative *and* radical—see modernism as a response to a single set of existing literary cultural conditions. This belief was shared widely, based as it was on a central aesthetic presupposition that the late Victorians belonged to a unified period, composed of imitators. Mark Van Doren, in his *Prize Poems 1913–1929* (1930), gave what he understood to be the laws governing literary periods, laws which were premised on a movement away from fixity. Asserting that high modern poets “were trying to write poetry ... that was not ‘poetical,’” Van Doren continued, “For as soon as poetry becomes ‘poetical’ it is dead. As soon, that is, as ... the attitude toward poetry on the part of the public becomes fixed, and ideas of what is poetic become stale or dogmatic, there needs to be a revolution” (11).

On a much more conservative note, Marguerite Wilkinson, editor of one of the three most widely printed modern anthologies of the first half of the twentieth century, could yet assert in her introduction to *New Voices* (1919) that “there is a new poetry” which was not “the poetry of those unimportant imitators of preceding periods whose lyrics are dull-coloured, too mellifluous, and sticky with sentimentality” (11). Indefatigable anthologist Louis Untermeyer (the Library of Congress lists well over 100 different entries) described the worst of the Victorian period as being a time “of smugness, of placid and pious sentimentality” (*Modern British Poetry* 1920: xii), leaving a situation at the end of the nineteenth century in which “[t]he passionate urge had spent itself, and in its place there remained nothing but that minor form of art which concerns itself less with creation than with re-creation” (*Modern American Poetry* 1930: 13). Rosa Mikels and Grace Shoup, literature instructors at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis, and writing in the democratic vein of Harriet Monroe, asserted that “The rise of every new school of art is a criticism of the faults that have grown up among the imitators of past excellences” (ix). For these anthologists, modernism began when it was believable to unify the recent past into a single thing.

Unifying the past was a way to handle the problem of not being able to bring a bewildering *present* into sufficient focus; anthologists contrasted the present with a more easily understandable past. As David Perkins points out for literary histories, such a contrast is also necessitated by the narrative form—one is necessarily more brief and schematic about the moment that precedes the one being discussed (36). But the period that is capable of being schematized is also inevitably seen as the antagonist in the narrative; its susceptibility to schematization is always a *negative* characteristic. (Thus, for modern anthologists an anthology of works from this

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earlier period would not be composed of differentiated items. They would all look the same.) Consequently, it was useful, even necessary, to have a focus begin at an earlier time, and make the earlier time the antagonist in the implicit narrative of the new anthology. In 1928, Sharon Brown insisted that “There is little difficulty in discerning a definite contrast between the inertness of *fin de siècle* and pre-war poetry and the vitality of later poetry” (23). Writing in the introduction to *The Golden Book of Modern English Poetry*, Philip Henderson asserted that “there is a gulf set between nearly all poetry written before and after the Great War of 1914–18, with all its attendant upheavals and profound spiritual crises” (vii). Mark Van Doren, in the introduction to his *Prize Poems 1913–1929*, argued that the bewilderment of readers of the new poetry was due to the fact that these poets “were getting as far away from the usual thing as paper and ink could take them. They had declared war upon the current conceptions of poetry” (10).

That antagonism, of course, is a familiar aspect of modernist history. But it has peculiar nuances that are at times overlooked. The singleness of late Victorian literary culture is portrayed as setting into play a narrative based on crisis and solutions (for those who followed a professionalist, high modern agenda), or organic decay and rejuvenated growth (for those who were tied to more traditional ways of understanding aesthetic development). There were differing senses of how deep this crisis was, but the inevitable response to this situation was to demand and produce newness. Contrasting the vibrant new present to the recent past, Marguerite Wilkinson noted that “Ten years ago, in this country, the waters [of poetic inspiration] were still.” Wilkinson believed in poetry’s organic growth, arguing that “the best poetry of our times has grown out of the life of our times, which life, in turn, grew out of the life that preceded it” (“New Voices” 1919: 1, 10).⁸ Such a belief was capable of being adopted by a wide range of anthologists, from Harriet Monroe, who asserted that “The poets of today ... seek a vehicle suited to their own epoch and their own creative mood, and resolutely reject all others” (*New Poetry* 1917: vi), to Louis Untermeyer’s insistence that, compared to their predecessors, “the modern poets are different and must be granted their own points of difference” (*Modern American Poetry* 1919: vii). More closely allied with high modernism, Margery Gordon and Marie

8 Similarly restrained was Jessie Belle Rittenhouse, who argued in the foreword to her *Little Book of Modern Verse*, the most deeply conservative of the big anthologies, that poems which were “a reflection of our own period” would reveal of new poets “what new interpretation they are giving to life, what new beauty they have apprehended, what new art they have evolved” (v).

B. King pointed to one of modern poetry's purposes as being "to jolt us out of ruts of complacency about the old, the accepted, in verse. It is impossible to express a new age completely in terms of the old" (1923: xi).

As an answer to what had preceded it, modernism, then, was something more than just a chronological designation. The implicit question answered by modern anthologists was "what *counts* as being new?" These anthologies, then, were premised not on a complete representation of all poetry written during this time—indeed, the flood of poetry made a complete archive, represented in a single book or even a set of books, impossible. More important, some kinds of contemporaneous things were not part of the archive. However, although the modern anthology was never a complete archive of early twentieth-century poetry, it did attain a kind of completeness as an archive of evidence for an argument about modern culture.

For anthologists, truly modern works needed to present a *valid* opposition to this single set of late Victorian cultural conditions. W. G. Bebbington, writing in his 1944 edition of Faber and Faber's *Introducing Modern Poetry*, asserted that

by "modern" poetry is not meant contemporary poetry in general. "Modern" when used to describe any art-form has never connoted mere contemporaneity, but has always served as a comprehensive term for the ideas contained in such words as "novel," "experimental" and "revolutionary." All those artists, therefore, whose expression continues merely to maintain traditions of manner and matter which they themselves have done nothing to create but which are legacies from the past are not considered "modern" and it is of no relevance to this point that they believe that past to be right in contrast with present standards and ideas. (5–6)

Arguing that though we might, in a "detached way ... appreciate the elegance of poetry written by men whose whole experience was different from ours," Michael Roberts in the 1932 *New Signatures* strenuously asserts that "we cannot accept it as a resolution of our own problems." For Roberts, the difficulty is that "It is not only that our response to certain words and rhythms has changed; new knowledge and new circumstances have compelled us to think and feel in ways not expressible in the old language at all. The poet who, using an obsolete technique, attempts to express his whole conception is compelled to be partly insincere or be content with slovenly thought and sentimental feeling" (7). Even someone as conservative as Alida Monro argued for her 1933 anthology that "Many poets have been included because, although their technique cannot be described as

definitely modern in the accepted sense of the word, nevertheless their approach to, and treatment of, their subjects is entirely new” (vii).⁹

The overarching argument that was made, then, was that modernism was a new time, somehow separable, with a coherent identity. Edward Marsh would market his string of Georgian anthologies implicitly following these principles, asserting in 1914 that “we are at the beginning of another ‘Georgian period’ which may take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past” (n.p.). In a 1915 school anthology put out by the British English Association, the editors noted the anomaly of including George Meredith but defended the anthology’s overall coherence by insisting that “the intention has been to represent mainly those poetic tendencies which have become dominant as the influence of the accepted Victorian masters has grown weaker, and from which the poetry of the future, however it may develop, must in turn take its start” (vii). Harriet Monroe argued that the American new poetry “is less vague, less verbose, less eloquent, than most poetry of the Victorian period and much work of earlier periods” (*New Poetry* 1917: vi).

There were, of course, different arguments for what made a particular poem truly modern. The modern poem wasn’t completely unrelated to the past, but it was always seen as some kind of *response* to what had preceded it. Given the overwhelming tendency to characterize Victorian writing as being made up of a stultifying unity, however, the dominant assertion of anthologists was that the truly modern anthology represented modernism because both it and modernism were healthily diverse. Through its diversity, modernism opposed earlier writing. The claims are everywhere, from Anita Forbes’s 1921 high school text, which asserted that “[i]n no other period of English literature has poetry been so varied, so like an elaborate prism which flashes new beauty to each eye” (v); to Robert Lynd’s *Anthology of Modern Verse*, which boasted that this was “an anthology that gives a better idea of the diffuse and ubiquitous riches of recent poetry than any that has yet appeared” (1923: xxiii); to F.O. Matthiessen, writing in 1950 in the authoritative *Oxford Book of American Verse* that “the most notable fact about American literature in the twentieth century ... is the number and variety of our poets” (xx–xxi).¹⁰

9 For other articulations of this point see Mégroz (1936: ix–x), Murphy (1938: xv), Evans and Lawson (1949: v), and Allott (1950: 15).

10 See also Farrar (1922: v), Stork (1923: xxi), Wilkinson (1923: 10), Untermeyer (1925: iii), Abercrombie (1931: 5), and Mégroz (1936: vii).



That insistence, that diverse modernism was a valid response to the dead-end singleness of Victorian art, was a way to assert that modernism had proper boundaries. But what are the consequences of having modernism sealed off from other periods? First, although anthologists never explicitly address it, this separation had benefits for marketing—if modernism isn’t separate and *new*, why buy an anthology of it? The newness found in modern anthologies was a reason to buy them. Edward Marsh, for example, whose *Georgian* anthologies are often thought to have begun a renewed public attention to poetry and the tremendous upsurge in anthology production (Ferry 217), promoted his collections as bringing in something new. As noted earlier in this essay, Marsh claimed, “This collection, drawn entirely from the publications of the past two years, may if it is fortunate help the lovers of poetry to realize that we are at the beginning of another ‘Georgian period’ which may take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past” (1914).

A second consequence is that it was now possible to *represent* modernism. This mode of understanding poetic history as a thing with boundaries turned modernism into an entity. As an entity, modernism’s conceptual boundaries made it possible for literary professionals to think about archiving it. The archive, though, was idiosyncratic, for its central archiving principle is about a beginning date, a rupture. By conceptualizing modernism as a response to Victorian culture, it became necessary to think of the modern anthology as a particular *kind* of archive, to think of it as a *book*. The modern anthology wanted to be something more than a collection; its status as the record of an event made it possible for it to be a book—not just an archive, but an archive with a narrative. And books can’t have *arbitrary* covers; they need to be conceptualized, even have a narrative—either of argumentation or of events. As in any narrative, you need a precipitating moment, person, or event, and you need some kind of crisis to which the main narrative of the book responds. Without this, you have no aesthetic period. Modernism began, then, when you could put its poems into a *book*.

The ways in which this response was formulated reveal a basic division within modernism. One major way of understanding modernism as a narrative was to think organically, a mode of conceptualizing which would enable the boundaries of this book to seem natural. Particularly for conservatives, organicist language, describing the exhaustion and renewal of literature, helped make these boundaries seem inevitable and less polemical. In 1924

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the notoriously conservative anthologist W. S. Braithwaite described the beginnings of the American poetic renaissance at the turn of the century as having been put in motion by “new roots in a soil not too richly fertilized by the chemistry of original song” (ix). In his 1919 anthology *Book of Modern British Verse*, Braithwaite spent more energy on the metaphor:

The late petals of the Victorian flower began to droop under the reign of Edward VII. They dropped to the ground at the first touch of the frosty truth in the substance ... of “The Everlasting Mercy” and “The Widow in the Bye Street.” The new era began with an assault upon reality and a shock of symbols. And upon it descended the conflagration of the world. The sowing was turned to the surface by a world war. The re-sowing began in the trenches: the first fruits of which are beautiful to the eye but bitter to the taste. What the full harvest will be no one can say, because the present bad weather of social, economic, and political turmoil is raging over the fields of dream.

Despite the awfulness of the prose, passages like this deserve attention for what they put forward as a model of poetic transformation and history, and how they go about doing so.¹¹ First, this is a way of asserting cultural necessity without giving evidence, for such prose comes from a radically different sense of what were the appropriate noises to make about literature. The organicist aesthetic did not encourage the marshalling of evidence; indeed, there is no way to argue against this because it is not *argumentation*. How would one argue with Harold Monro’s introduction to his 1920 *Anthology of Recent Poetry*, which begins with the assertion that “The best poetry is always about the earth itself and all the strange and lovely things in it.” (v)? Or with Robert Lynd’s 1923 prefatory essay which begins, “Poetry was born, like Beatrice, under a dancing star” (ix)? You can only stand back and watch them happen.

Immune to evidentiary logic and the type of falsifiable counter-arguments that go with it, such writing yet accomplished some useful work. Its argument is simple: when you make the past into a single thing, it is no longer organically alive; it is dying out; it needs pruning. It needs new growth.¹² Used much more aggressively by conservatives than by radicals,

11 For other examples of this kind of understanding of literature, see Brown (1928: 40), Day Lewis and Strong (1941: xix), and Untermeyer (1919: vii).

12 This organicist language had a heritage, of course, for it was the language in which literary histories had been written. For a brief description of this organicist language and some of its consequences, see Elkins 31–33, 42–43.

the organic was first of all a way of making modernism seem natural, inevitable. Organic things have unselfconscious processes of cause and effect that result in states of affairs that could not be any other than what they are. Marguerite Wilkinson asserted, “The new poetry is never absolutely new when it is absolutely poetry. It is simply a growth out of the old which has all the slight variations that go with heredity.... Old laws always afford new opportunities to genius, for genius is always new” (*Contemporary Poetry* 1923: 12). As the “simply” suggests, the story could go no other way; the best of modern poetry is self-evidently authentic.¹³

Organic things are unself-consciously deterministic, but in their strict cause-and-effect character they cannot be deliberate, rhetorical—indeed, they have an existence separate from the motivations of individual poets. The organic made modernism seem like the offspring of a *culture* (which itself was also understood in an organic sense), and not of individual, deliberate choices, focused on finding solutions for aesthetic problems (which was a professionalist, high modern model). Sharon Brown argued that “The assertion of America’s literary emergence did not come until the voice of America, grown powerful with the expansion of commerce and manufacture, with the headlong settlement of the West, with the impelling urge of high achievements in discovery and invention, insisted on being heard, and when that time came it was not one voice but many voices” (1928: 29).

Organicist language fits more comfortably with some modern narratives than with others, however. The use of organicist metaphors was most often employed by people like Wilkinson, whose pre-professionalist agenda found them using a gems aesthetic when it came to talking about affect, or about the causes for aesthetic change. But the organic was also a form of history that would soon die, for a more compelling model of literary change had arisen—a high modern one based on a more professionalist sense of problems and solutions. Michael Roberts, writing in *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1939), argued that “primarily poetry is an exploration of the possibilities of language” (3). Operating with that presupposition, Roberts defended his exclusion of Georgian poets like Walter de la Mare and Edmund Blunden—poets who “seem to me to have written good poems without having been compelled to make any notable development of poetic technique” (1). For Roberts, the poems he included

13 Organicist discourse sat comfortably alongside an aesthetic of the genius, which was commonly understood at this time to appear at the *beginning* of cultural transformations. The autochthonous genius arises only out of the organic. In this scheme, the great poet becomes a genius in the Homeric sense, scarcely aware of his own stature.

were those “which seem to me to add to the resources of poetry, to be likely to influence the future development of poetry and language” (2). The idea that history was a narrative of *valid* responses was much more amenable to those anthologies working within a high modern aesthetic than it was to anthologies working with other forms of modernism. The high modern aesthetic came with an “ought.”

Both organicist and more professionalist, high modern anthologies argued that modernism’s diversity was the premier sign of a change in the aesthetic landscape. Particularly early on, modern anthologies revealed a multiplicity of valid adaptations to current conditions. Diversity was evidence of modernism’s transformation of the stultifying unity of the late nineteenth century. Diverse modernism was the protagonist to the antagonist of earlier poetry.¹⁴ As L. A. G. Strong noted in 1924, “how could a homogeneous anthology be anything but the production of a clique?” (xvii). Movements and isms did not fare well in modern anthologies (and anthologies which in retrospect seem the products of particular schools were at the time typically understood as merely representing the “best” of current poetry). In contrast to the unified past, the diverse present seemed more vigorous and heroic. Sharon Brown noted that “the ‘black-walnut period’ of the eighties and nineties was a period of literary doldrums which calls only for the tribute of a passing shudder” (27). In contrast, for Brown, was the modern period, on both sides of the Atlantic:

When we turn to the progress of poesy in modern England we find many parallels to recent American literary history. There is the same lassitude in the eighties and nineties, when Victorianism was in the last stages of senescence; there are the same significant forerunners of a new day; there is the same startling impact of revolutionary theories on a complacent conservatism; and there is, to a much greater degree, the powerful stimulus of the World War. (40–41)

One of diversity’s central virtues was that it encouraged a vagueness in evaluative standards that could handle the new kinds of poetry being written. But—and more crucial for a sense of when modernism began—this diversity also meant that anthologists didn’t have to talk about modernism’s *ending* boundaries; they only had to theorize the *beginning*. Initially, this would be a triumphalist archive, recording the moment of a change, but

14 Diversity could also be useful for promulgating ideas of democracy, which, as Craig Abbott points out, was important for modern American anthologies’ role in high schools in promoting values of citizenship (1990: 210–12).

not the demise of that change. As it was first constructed, the first story of modernism was easy, a simple cause and effect.

Once modernism itself could be seen as more than just a reaction, once it could be seen as composed of a series of events that began and ended (that is, once it had a history), the story got more complicated. While the first anthologies of modernism told a story without an ending, theorizing the ending of modernism eventually became a problem for modernism's proponents. By the second half of the twentieth century, with high modernism firmly in place as *the* prestigious form of literary expression after the nineteenth century, it was clear that the supposed diversity of modernism had also been the site of a struggle for validity that high modernism had eventually won. That victory, putting in place as it did a single form of correct modernism, was also the occasion for modernism's demise; high modernism's validity carried its own death within itself. By the 1970s, modernism's ending boundaries were often described in the same way as those which originally set off modernism from what preceded it. And, when modernism was seen as a unified thing whose energetic diversity had stalled, its story was in as much trouble as the period that preceded it had been fifty years earlier.

That was a defeat of modernism's early potential, but, archivally, it was conceptually satisfying. Modernism's trouble, its finished story, made a more satisfactory archive possible. In the first generation of modern anthologies, modernism was an *incomplete* event. These early anthologies contained within themselves an odd archive, an archive that was yet in flux, and that needed an ending in order for its principles of inclusion to have limits, rather than to stretch boundlessly into the future. When modernism's diversity stalled, a complete archive, of a sort, became possible.

Modernism's
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