

The Sound of the Past

Echoes and Incantations in
Eliot, H.D., and Woolf

Edited by

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Series in Literary Studies



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Introduction:

Drawing sustenance from the dead

Susan McCabe, Steven Minas and Catherine Theis

University of Southern California

I.

This book began as a conference panel on the 100th Anniversary of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. But as the panel developed into a collection of essays on the relationship of the past to Modernist aesthetics, we expanded the scope of the topic to include other authors. While Eliot remains central, we include contributions on H.D. and Virginia Woolf as well as Hope Mirrlees.

None of the Modernists covered in this collection thought that the "past is a foreign country." In fact, they believed, with William Faulkner, that "the past is never dead. It's not even past." Eliot, Woolf, and H.D. all produced works demonstrating the past's living presence. Eliot theorized it in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Woolf in her late work, "A Sketch of the Past," and H.D. in the many notes and headings to her translations. For these authors and many Modernists not included in the collection, the past provided "sustenance" for their work. Whether the past resurfaces as echoes from the music halls of St. Louis, the choriambics of Greek melic poetry, or the sylvan tradition, it achieves a new sound in each of the works discussed below. In many ways, we still hear the sounds today, and this collection is a reminder that what we hear as the past is simply the most vital part of ourselves in conversation with others. What is meaningful to us, in other words, is never separated from us by time, but instead, co-present as living art.

II.

The following essays all address the multiform way Modernist writers echo or channel their precursors. As the collection had its origin in *The Waste Land's* centennial, we begin with three essays on Eliot. Steven Nathaniel's opening chapter examines Eliot's thwarted attempt to recapture the sound of the past in his poetry. According to Nathaniel,

Eliot's musical allusions and quotations rehearse the inaudibility of their history and grieve their incongruity to the present. This is to say

that when Eliot stirs some vestige of a ragtime tune or a forgotten performance of Wagner, he conspicuously installs an auditory vacancy amidst the otherwise engaging play of poetic oration.

This vacancy, however, is not where “where one experiences music [...] Quite the opposite, the rag points us to an event outside the oration, whereas the rise and fall of the poet’s stress coupled with his phonetic gasps and exhalations, approximate music inasmuch as they supersede this referenced event.” Such auditory attempts by Eliot demonstrate a persistent theme in this collection; that is, sound’s relationship not only to poetry, but to how we hear the past.

Nathaniel’s argument provides a counterpoint to Steven Minas’s discussion of Eliot’s use of allusion, a much-trodden ground in Eliot criticism. In Chapter 2, Minas turns to Eliot’s early prose collection, *The Sacred Wood*, to argue that Eliot’s allusive practice is fundamentally resonant. Resonance, in this sense, “identifies a complex yet generative sense of allusion that captures Eliot’s composite aesthetic, which is a synchronic practice that draws from disparate traditions, sources, and media to produce a sort of poetic simultaneity (echoes on echoes).” What Eliot identifies in his notes to an unpublished lecture as “intensity by association” is a resonant practice of drawing together “several planes of reality at once.” Resonance, in other words, partly explains the difficulty or “obscurity” of some of Eliot’s allusions, but more importantly it identifies what make them particularly powerful and memorable. Rather than static ornaments of literary language, Eliot’s allusions are constantly sounding, which allows different readers at different historical moments to hear something new.

In the last chapter on Eliot (Chapter 3), Catherine Theis examines the role of “place” in Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and Hope Mirrlees’s *Paris: A Poem*. The modernist long poem has always been a form congenial to urban exploration, but Theis graphs a poetic direction based on the poet’s responsiveness to a memorable place in their personal lives, as well as charting the convergence of a friendship. The historical landscape of Paris animates Mirrlees’ poem into pixilated being, while the contemplative environment of Shamley Wood primes Eliot to write his *Quartets*. Mirrlees excavates the historical past to create hyperreal moments in the present, while Eliot manipulates his personal history to create a metaphysical realm. For both poets, listening to the past primes them to find that emotional trace, that place where it all begins; the final arrival.

III.

Perhaps more than any of the major Modernists, H.D. has a wide, allusive net, reinventing the past through conversation with a variegated mix, including Sappho, theologians, travel guides, and Hermes Trismegistus. Her calling upon

the past leads her to an inventive break from traditional prosody and from modernist peers. This is especially true of her need to break free from Pound's attempt to bind her to Imagism, and then to mock her Hellenism as a simple decorative rehash. In Chapter 4, Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos deftly explores Pound's manifold mastery of traditional metrics, but more importantly, his failure to understand or to encourage H.D.'s gift for truly "making it new." The chapter argues that "Pound's own poetry and prosody is full of examples of exact, rigorous, masculine classicism," but "that H.D.'s 'female meter' is imagined by Pound as separate from his own masculinist prosody." She escapes and fashions a modern feminist prosody that "conducts the argument," "that avoids metrical regularity of any kind." Tryphonopoulos demonstrates that *The Cantos* is also a storehouse of prosodic echoes, variations, and experiments offering a history of European and English prosody," "much of what H.D. was to achieve as a poet has its roots in her responses to Hellenism and, in particular, to her reading, translation of, and fascination with the Greek epigrammatists, largely Sappho" where her "focus is not on prosody or metrical units but rather on commenting on the fragmentary and palimpsestic nature of Sappho's surviving corpus." For H.D., "Sapphic fragmentation is a creative praxis," which makes the reader's relationship to Sappho fresh, direct, and fractured.

In Chapter 5, Susan McCabe explores "green hermeticism," a term coined by Peter L. Wilson, Christopher Bamford, Kevin Townley, and Pir Zia Inayat Khand that crosses East-Asian and Judeo-Christian traditions, recommending it as a mode of healing the planet, joining science and ecology. McCabe argues for this visionary philosophy as inspiring H.D.'s poetry, linking her to ancient hermetic practices, and making way for her ecologically charged poetics. This chapter explores the poet's rhythmic *method* for synchronizing ecological, erotic, aesthetic and hermetic worlds, establishing herself as a visionary eco-poet. One through-line is McCabe's explication of "jellyfish consciousness" discovered during H.D.'s honeymoon with Bryher on St. Mary's island in the Scillies. This allows her to configure "womb consciousness" and the "overmind" as a means of seeing beyond androcentric and usual models of perception that see what is *not there* when the pair travels to Greece.

In Chapter 6, Anna Fyta enacts close-ups of several stories based upon H.D.'s travel to Greece, stories that are often ignored but which pinpoint the striking simultaneity of temporal and eternal realms. They are marvelous, dense "hyperrealist" enactments of autobiography, scene, and colonial residue. A modernist Baedeker, H.D. fuses the materiality of travel with internal experience, showing the interstices between the subjective mind and historical specificity. H.D.'s omnivorous eye cannot escape the past, seeing through concussive layers of war, antiquity, and sacred sites.

Finally, in this section, Graham Borland's chapter on H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* and *Trilogy* examines these long poems as apocalyptic in genre and "narrative form." He writes,

Developing under Roman imperial domination, apocalyptic literature was not simply another style of prophesy or myth-making. The apocalyptic text's key gesture – taking a narrative standpoint 'outside' of time – was itself an intervention *in* time. As a kind of resistance literature, apocalyptic writing did not just announce a better future ahead, but sought to *open up* the sense of a future which the violence and rhetoric of empire foreclosed.

In his reading, H.D. is a modern pioneer in this under-recognized genre who "deploys apocalyptic narrative form as a means of both individual and collective recovery, while interrogating the literary, religious, and political legacies of antiquity."

IV.

The final section turns to the prose of Virginia Woolf, the great Modernist of the interior landscape. In Chapter 8, Kevin Tunnicliffe examines Woolf's lyrical masterpiece, *The Waves*, and demonstrates how Woolf challenges long-held Enlightenment beliefs about aesthetics by tapping into "new philosophical, psychological, and biological conversations." Tunnicliffe coins the term "anaesthetics" to explain Woolf's practice, arguing that it "attends to the ways modernity, language, and even art, cut off, block, or otherwise impede the senses while simultaneously opening up a new terrain of aesthetic experiences."

In the final chapter of this collection, Jonathan Najarian moves outside of the canonical and strictly fictional realm of Woolf's prose to examine one of Woolf's "lighter" efforts, *Flush*. Like her mock-biography *Orlando*, Woolf plays with convention in *Flush* by placing a dog, specifically Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel (Flush), at the center of her "biography." Najarian demonstrates that not only does Woolf's story anticipate "a particular subset of postmodern fiction, namely the genre of experimental, nonhuman life writing," it also looks back to the "novel of circulation," "a genre that flourished in the eighteenth century." In locating Woolf's pseudo-biography in an early parodic tradition, Najarian offers "context for reading *Flush*" that "helps to explain the formal hybridity of the text."

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About the Contributors

Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos is professor of English at the University of Alberta, Augustana campus where, between 2019-2024, he served as Dean and Executive Officer. He has served as Secretary of the International Ezra Pound Society since 2000; and between 2000 and 2015, he served as Associate Editor, *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*. His essays on Ezra Pound, H.D. and other Anglo-American (and Greek) modernist poets have appeared in North American and European journals and essay collections. He is the author, editor, co-editor, or translator of seventeen volumes, including *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound's The Cantos* (1992); *I Cease Not to Yowl: Pound's Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti* (1998); *Majic Ring: An annotated edition of H.D. (writing as Delia Alton)* (2009); *The Ezra Pound Encyclopedia* (2009); *Approaches to Teaching Pound's Poetry and Prose* (2021); *Approaches to Teaching the Works of C. P. Cavafy* (2025); and *C.P. Cavafy The Collected Poems: A New Translation* (2025).

Anna Fyta teaches English and American Literature at Athens College, Greece. Her scholarship focuses on H.D., Pound, Euripides, Sappho, classical receptions, and travel writing in Modernist texts. Her essay “Translation as Mythopoesis: H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt* as Meta-palinode” was published in *The Classics in Modernist Translation* (Bloomsbury Academic 2019). Her article “Dramatic Heterotopias: Joan Jonas’ *Lines in the Sand* and *Helen in Egypt*” was included in the Journal *Ex-Centric Narratives* (Aristotle University). In April 2021, her essay “Galatea Kazantzaki (Alexiou) (1884–1962): a Modernist Greek Author’s Decadent Poetics” was published in *Feminist Modernist Studies*. In 2023, she co-edited “Trajectories from the Past: Modernist Futures and the Future of Modernism” for the academic online journal *Ex-Centric Narratives*. In 2024, she co-organized the international Symposium “Emerging Perspectives in H.D.’s Hellenic Modernity” hosted by Aristotle U in Thessaloniki. Forthcoming from the University Press of Florida is her work titled *The H.D. Anthology: An Introduction to H.D.’s Early Hellenic Poetry and Prose*.

Susan McCabe was born on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, has taught in Oregon and Arizona, and received her PhD at UCLA. She also taught and conducted research in her mother’s country of Sweden. She teaches at the University of Southern California. She directed the PhD in Literature and Creative Writing Program at USC (2006-2009), and has acted as President of the Modernist Studies Association. She is the author of six books, including two critical studies—*Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* (Penn State University Press, 1994)

and *Cinematic Modernism: Modern Poetry and Film* (Cambridge University Press, 2005)—and two poetry volumes, *Swirl* (Red Hen Press, 2003), and *Descartes' Nightmare* (winner of the Agha Shahid Ali prize and published by Utah University Press in 2008). She is also the author of a bi-biography of modernist poet and writer pair, *An Untold Love Story: H.D. & Bryher* (Oxford 2021). Most recently, McCabe's new poetry book, *I Woke A Lake* (2025), has been published by The Center for Literary Publishing (CLP) at Colorado State University (CSU).

Steve Nathaniel is an Assistant Professor at Grand Valley State University. His research examines the intersections of literature, technology, and sound, with special interest in the relationship between communication technology and African American culture. His work has appeared in *Modernism/modernity*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, and elsewhere.

Steven Minas is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Southern California. His research focuses on the early modern period with a broad interest in poetics. He has published on Milton's use of allusion in *Milton Studies* and on the history of creative criticism in *Diacritics*.

Kevin Tunnicliffe recently earned his PhD in English at the University of Victoria in Canada. He is an active member of the Modernist Studies Association and has helped organize the annual Bloomsday celebration in Victoria for the past two years. His work has been published in *CanLit* and *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*. Kevin's dissertation is entitled "Anaesthetic Narrative Form in Modernist Fiction," and brings together theories of affect, neo-formalism, and neuroscience to challenge the canonical reading of high modernism that privileges aesthetics of shock and reinvigoration; instead, he examines the widespread, if underappreciated, experience of insensitivity as a consequence of—or perhaps the only rational response to—the shocks of modernity.

Graham Borland is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Cambridge, having previously studied English and philosophy at Maynooth University. His current research project concerns ineffability, negative theology, and secularity in modernist literature, focusing on the works of Hugh MacDiarmid, D. H. Lawrence, H.D., and Virginia Woolf. He has written on topics concerning modernism, religion, and esotericism for *Notes & Queries*, *Reading Religion*, and a forthcoming edited collection on D. H. Lawrence's influences.

Jonathan Najarian is Assistant Teaching Professor of English at Sacred Heart University. He is the editor of *Comics and Modernism: History, Form, and Culture* (2024), the first book-length volume to explore the compelling connections

between literary and artistic modernism and the medium of comics. His essays and reviews have appeared in *Modernism/modernity*, *American Periodical Studies*, *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, and *American Literary History*, among other venues.

Catherine Theis is the author of the poetry collection *The Fraud of Good Sleep* (Salt, 2011) and the play *MEDEA* (Plays Inverse, 2017). She is the translator of *Slashing Sounds* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), the first collection of the Italian poet Jolanda Insana to be published in English. Theis' latest collection of poems, *By a Roman*, will be published by Antiphony Press in October 2025. Her work has also been published in *Classics in Modernist Translation* (Bloomsbury, 2019), a volume that addresses modernist engagements with the literature of Greco-Roman antiquity. Her contribution, "Braving the elements" explores the similarities between poets H.D. and Robinson Jeffers and their interest in the choral odes of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Theis teaches at the University of Southern California.

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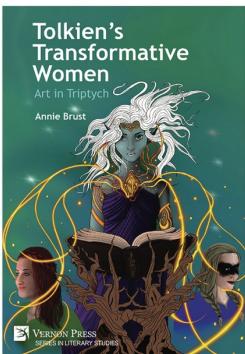
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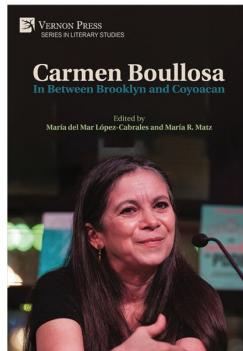
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