

## T. E. Hulme, *Selected Writings*

Dan Stone

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In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche summed up the modern situation, a situation that was to be variously feared, condemned, or celebrated: 'once you know that there are no goals, you also know that there is no "chance"' (§109). In other words, the absence of cosmic certainties, the loss of belief in the inherent meaningfulness of History, also means that one has to rely on one's own efforts to give life a meaning; one cannot depend on the vagaries of fortune. Anyone interested in seeing how this Nietzschean oracle weaved its way through the complex cultural milieu of the Edwardian and early interwar period could do worse than consult this well-chosen selection from T. E. Hulme. The book is usefully annotated throughout and includes a number of well-reproduced illustrations.

Hulme was no stranger to Nietzsche. As well as being well acquainted with French poetry and philosophy, he had also spent time in Germany, as his somewhat pretentious "German Chronicle" abundantly proves. And the "Nietzsche effect" is clear in numerous claims: 'there is no such thing as an absolute truth to be discovered' (18); '\_this modern disease, the horror of constancy' (171); and, sounding especially like a harbinger of postmodernism, 'Why grumble because there is no end discoverable in the world? There is no end at all except in our own constructions' (34). What Hulme has to offer that one cannot simply find in today's postmodern theory, however, is an illustration of the intellectual ferment of a period that—as McGuinness sets out admirably in his introduction—is domesticated by scholars historical and literary when they call it simply the "age of modernism". It is not because Hulme discusses the competing intellectual currents of his time that he is worth reading; it is because he embodies them in a way which is engagingly and challengingly bizarre to the contemporary reader, who will have many assumptions about the relationships between art and politics called into question by Hulme's world-picture.

Although this world-picture was, as McGuinness rightly notes, still incomplete on Hulme's death in the trenches in 1917, it is not as self-contradictory as one might think on a cursory reading. There is certainly a challenge in attempting to square the claim that there is no comprehensive scheme to the cosmos (20) with the assertion, made equally strongly, that 'the nature of man is absolutely fixed' (167). But it is possible, and the way to approach it is via Hulme's understanding of art. Here Hulme draws the distinction between "abstraction" and "romanticism" in a way which conveniently leaves little room for blurriness around the edges. Romanticism, the disease of art since the Renaissance, means a form of naturalism which draws its strength from the realistic—though not merely imitative—portrayal of nature; it is an art which, taking pleasure in the forms of nature, reassures us of the value of life (99). Abstraction, on the other hand, sees the nature of man as fixed in a world of flux; its art is correspondingly harder, more impassive, "classical". This abstraction can be defined as 'a feeling of separation in the face of outside nature' (100), in which geometrical shapes provide a refuge from the chaotic arbitrariness of the surrounding impermanence. Hence Hulme's defence of the art of Lewis, Epstein, and Bomberg, as well as his own demonstration of the classical principle in the best of his imagist fragments:

Old houses were scaffolding once  
and workmen whistling.

One of the clearest examples of the fact that the intellectual fashions of this period are by no means predictable in retrospect is the clash between Hulme and the now-forgotten Anthony Mario Ludovici. Although both men in their criticism were seeking refuge from the degenerate conditions of modern life, they found it in different places. After Ludovici attacked Epstein as representing 'anarchy in art' in his art column in the *New Age* at the end of 1913, Hulme responded with one of his most pugnacious diatribes. Apart from recommending with sinister sincerity that the 'most appropriate means of dealing with him [Ludovici] would be a little personal violence' (119), Hulme also defended Epstein for the very reasons that Ludovici supported other artists: Epstein's sculptures and drawings, especially the

Rock Drill, resist degenerative tendencies, since it 'by an extreme abstraction, by the selection of certain lines, gives an effect of tragic greatness' (117).

There followed a fracas conducted in the pages of the *New Age* over the early weeks of 1914; yet the irony is that Ludovici and Hulme were not so far removed in other respects, both considering themselves cultivated Nietzschean cognoscenti, both maintaining an elitist 'aristocratic radicalism' (Brandes' term for Nietzsche) not dissimilar from the Edwardian radicalism of a Willoughby de Broke, and both holding an anti-democratic stance accompanied by an attraction to violence, a kind of syndicalist Toryism. In other words, both critics felt themselves to be at the head of the intellectual avant-garde, yet disagreed violently as to what this avant-garde consisted of. Ludovici dismissed Epstein even though, like Pound for example, he could have 'welcomed' it as signalling the end of democracy. The birth of modernism was more complex than literary history has often admitted; that Ludovici's form of it—claiming to represent a 'transvaluation of all values'—would lose out to Hulme's was far from clear in 1914.

Besides, there is much that Hulme did not correctly predict. His defence of abstract, especially geometrical art (146-147), is compelling, and should be read by anyone who is tempted to ask of a painting or sculpture, 'what does it represent?' Nevertheless, he wrongly claimed that the main thrust of abstract art (by which he means cubism and vorticism) has 'engendered on the side of it a minor movement which uses abstractions for their own sake in a much more scattered way. I do not think this minor movement is destined to survive' (137). This 'minor movement' Hulme believed to be typified by Kandinsky. This is nitpicking, however, in a series of essays which are as fresh now as they were eighty years ago in grappling with the surprises of modernist art and poetry (and see, furthermore, his excursus on the metaphorical use of the word "fresh" (80)).

Apart from their value in understanding the best critical reception of modernist art, Hulme's essays are also meant as further illustrations of the emerging classical sensibility, and the concomitant rejection of the romantic. This dualism between romanticism and abstraction is repeated on a more explicitly political level, in the essays "Cinders", "Romanticism and Classicism", "A Tory Philosophy", and

"A Notebook (Humanism and the Religious Attitude)". It is here that the difficulties begin for the modern reader. It is easy to comprehend Hulme's defence of abstraction in art by appealing to a classical sensibility—finding permanence in chaos—but we tend to associate this development more as the result of a sense of release from the constrictions of Georgian poetry and with the vitalist drives of modernism than with a fear of the void. But Hulme's preference for the avant-garde in art, an avant-garde which still has the power to shock and confuse, went hand in hand with his admiration for Maurras' anti-semitic and ultra-reactionary Action Française (though his own writings are free of antisemitism), and with his attempt to find 'objective things in ethics' (206) which would allow him to maintain the fiction of an unchanging human essence, the impossibility of regeneration conceived in utopian terms (167), and the need to provide Toryism with a sound philosophical basis. Although he was not the only person to attempt to do this in the years just before and after the Great War (similar attempts were made by Ludovici, Willoughby de Broke and the "diehard" peers, and Arnold White among others), Hulme's is certainly the most thoughtful. And to the modern reader the most challenging. When one realises that in the Edwardian period it was perfectly possible to be anti-democratic yet believe that 'No theory that is not fully moved by the conception of justice asserting the equality of men, and which cannot offer something to all men, deserves or is likely to have a future' (179n) it is clear that, for all their superficial similarities, the intellectual landscape of the age of Hulme is one that is fundamentally divorced from our own. Divorced by the war which consumed Hulme himself, and the one that followed.

The best evidence of this divorce is the question of Hulme's demand for classicism. For all his admonishing of those who are unable to face up to the modern reality which demands acknowledging the 'fundamental chaos' (25), Hulme is himself assailed at every turn by horror vacui. Where Nietzsche saw the absence of transcendental certainties as reinvigorating, a chance to escape from the enervating security of tradition and to shape anew one's destiny (to 'become what one is'), Hulme's defence of the modern—like Pound's or Eliot's—was founded on a reactionary need to bridge the chasm. His condemnation of romanticism was based on its sloppiness, its

pathetic refusal to face up to modernity's loss of the transcendental; but he wanted no less than the romantics to be able to dismiss that loss, simply believing romanticism to be an avoidance-mechanism more than a genuine response to the modern challenge. Hence his tale of despair and renewal: sitting one day in the library, consumed by the 'universal deliquescence', Hulme rescued himself from the horror of chaos only by writing down, with 'a brutal act of assertion,' those things on which he had convictions: 'These were solid rock, whatever might be the extent of the flux elsewhere' (182-183). He refuses to acknowledge that this solid rock is still subjective, that it has no more universal applicability than that which he denounces.

Hulme's writings, like the man himself ('it is taking a concrete example of the working out of a principle in action that you can get its best definition' (69)) is unremittingly combative, he refuses to allow one to shrink from the reality of the situation described by Nietzsche. The surprise lies in his wanting to overcome chaos by appealing to some form of "objective ethics", and sees this possibility in a renewed "classicism" or abstraction, that is to say, in modern art. When T. S. Eliot described Joyce's "mythical method" as 'simply a way of controlling and ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' he could just as well have been describing Hulme's attempt to deal with the legacy of Nietzsche. The interplay, the palpable tension between Hulme's need for permanence, his haughty condemnation of those who will not see the fundamental chaos, his awareness of but desire to overlook the necessary artifice involved in 'the re-establishment of the temper or disposition of mind which can look at a gap or chasm without shuddering' (185) is the fundamental dialectic pulsing away in Hulme's writings. It is the sincere violence of the pulse, along with his intellectual brilliance, which ensures that Hulme's works do not degenerate into circularity or self-contradiction, but reveal with unusual clarity the intellectual and spiritual acrobatics which went into the making of the modern age.



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