Afterword

Writing in the wake of the two 'Post-Impressionist' exhibitions organised by Roger Fry at the Grafton Galleries in 1910 and 1912, Clive Bell wondered how posterity would judge a movement whose claim upon the present seemed to be weakening:

> Anyone who cares more for a theory than for the truth is at liberty to say that the art of the Impressionists, with their absurd notions about scientific representation, is a lovely fungus growing very naturally on the ruins of the Christian slope. [For] we must never forget that accurate representation of what the grocer thinks he sees was the central dogma of Victorian art. It is the general acceptance of this view – that the accurate imitation of objects is an essential quality in a work of art – and the general inability to create, or even to recognise, aesthetic qualities, that mark the nineteenth century as the end of a slope. [. . .] a sketch of the Christian slope may well end with the Impressionists, for Impressionist theory is a blind alley. Its only logical development would be an art-machine – a machine for establishing values correctly, and determining what the eye sees scientifically, thereby making the production of art a mechanical certainty. [. . .]
>
> But if the Impressionists, with their scientific equipment, their astonishing technique, and their intellectualism, mark the end of one era, do they not rumour the coming of another? Certainly today there is stress in the cryptic laboratory of Time. A great thing is dead; but, as that sagacious Roman noted:
>
> > 'haud igitur penitus pereunt quaecumque videntur, quango alid ex alio reficit natura nec ullam rem gigni patitur nisi morte adiuta aliena.' [no visible object perishes utterly, since nature renews one thing from another, and permits nothing to be born unless aided by another's death.]
>
> And do not the Impressionists, with their power of creating works of art that stand on their own feet, bear in their arms a new age? For if the venial sin of Impressionism is a grotesque theory and its justification a glorious practice, its historical importance consists in its having taught people to seek the significance of art in the work itself, instead of hunting for it in the emotions and interests of the outer world.[1]

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The passage – taken from Bell's classic book of modernist art criticism, *Art* (1914) – offers a curiously divided response to the twentieth century's rapidly coagulating conception of impressionist painting. According to that narrative, impressionism was the logical conclusion to a fixation on representational accuracy that had been the keynote of Western or 'Christian' art since the development of linear perspective, after which '[f]ormal significance loses itself in preoccupation with exact representation and ostentatious cunning'.[2] Later in his study Bell will accept the general drift of this argument, distinguishing the mechanical 'soltimbancery' of European painting from the 'primitive' *naïveté* of art forms untouched by the perspectival ingenuities of the Renaissance.[3] Like Fry, he will argue that the explosion of new post-impressionist art forms (expressionism, cubism, fauvism) not only marked a revival of that older, more expressive aesthetics, but also signalled an emergence from the great aesthetic *cul de sac* down which Western art had driven since the thirteenth or fourteenth century.

To many, that wrong turn had seemed to terminate in the painting of the impressionists.[4] But while Bell expresses a clear sense of an 'end of an era', a feeling that 'a great thing is dead', he is less than clear about how to judge this fact. Impressionism could be seen as a beginning as well as an ending, or a beginning *because* an ending. Its scientific investigations had carried the artist as far as possible towards presenting the nature of the world as it is, had succeeded even in decomposing light for analysis, and could go no further. Yet according to Bell it had also unshackled the artwork from the obligation to point a message beyond itself, thereby freeing the artist from her or his responsibilities to 'the emotions and interests of the outer world'. In this sense, impressionism could seem self-sufficient and inward-facing in a way that prepared the ground for all modernist style, from the wild colouring of Henri Matisse to the erotic expressionism of Edvard Munch.

The passage crystallises some important aspects of the argument that I have been putting forward in this book and indicates how they ramify beyond its period of concern. First, Bell's comments testify to the totemic significance of impressionism as a cultural phenomenon for writers and painters alike, even for those to whom it represented a fundamental error. I began this study with George Moore's description of his first encounter with impressionism as a moment of crisis or revelation, one which disclosed a whole new aesthetic lexicon. In his vision of the impressionists as the cradle-bearers of a new age, Bell seems at least partly to concur with this outlook. For both Moore and Bell, the importance of impressionism

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as a visual style and a cultural watershed is unignorable. The same is true for each of the writers discussed in this study, whose engagements with impressionist art and aesthetics not only transformed their verse, but also left a deep (and deeply uneven) imprint on the wider poetic milieu of the *fin de siècle* and the early twentieth century. This imprint had various and often contradictory manifestations, ranging from the fragmentary 'decadent' poetics which Symons formulated through analogies with Whistler and Degas, to the symbolist style Yeats articulated in response to Manet's assault on the Renaissance canon; and from the Forgotten School's rhythmical approximations of the impressionist *tache*, to the self-divided Image which emerged from Pound's protracted grapple with the irregularity of the impression itself. Yet the significant divergence of these engagements underscores a central contention of this book, which is that many of the most important forms, antagonisms and innovations of anglophone poetry during the period were profoundly marked by a responsiveness to both the possibilities and the challenges of impressionism.

As I have been suggesting, the literary impacts of impressionism were particularly pronounced at the turn of the century. But as Bell's commentary indicates, it would remain a central preoccupation for English onlookers even after war broke out in Europe. Indeed, at the height of modernism's Oedipal assault on the nineteenth century in the 1910s and 1920s – a period which coincided with impressionism's extended boom on the international art market following Durand-Ruel's major 1905 London show – impressionism could seem at once retrograde and of the past but also pervasive and ubiquitous, even inescapable. Bell's present tense gives a sense of this, as does the phrase 'Post-Impressionism', which sets in train a recursive dialectic of severance and attachment, consigning everything subsequent to impressionism to be defined by it, even if by antithesis. And while, historically speaking, the 'Post-Impressionist' epithet did not carry over into literature to the same extent as its unprefixed precursor, the literary after-effects of impressionism – those after-effects to which I gesture in my title – continued to be felt well after the period with which this book has been concerned. The transience and apparent subjectivism of impressionist aesthetics would trouble various major modernist writers, particularly those who were guided by the aesthetic lodestars of objectivity and impersonality, such as Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot – and, of course, Pound himself.[5] Yet for many others, impressionism in its different forms would continue to serve as an example and source of inspiration. In the poems of Amy Lowell, D. H. Lawrence and Wallace Stevens, as well as the fiction of Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf – to give only examples

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which are directly relevant to impressionist painting – impressionism was both a subject and a stylistic model.[6] Such topics are beyond the scope of the present study, but I hope that this book indicates some of the ways in which they might be approached.

Second, the passage puzzles over whether to describe impressionism as an historical end-point, but it also expresses a deeper uncertainty about the ends of impressionism itself. In particular, it is divided on the question that first baffled critics at the inaugural exhibition of the 'Société anonyme des peintres, sculpteurs et graveurs' in 1874, and which has been a source of vexation to scholarship ever since: the question of whether impressionism is participatory or passive, subjective or objective, creative and self-expressive or mimetic and dependent on the external world. The back-and-forth movement of Bell's prose – its sceptical withdrawal from a clichéd theory in which it later partially acquiesces, only then to overturn or contradict itself a further time – is an isolated instance of the wider pattern of argument and counter-argument which I have been tracing. At various moments the question of how to define impressionism arose for each of the writers I have been discussing; and for each it provoked different answers, which they often articulated in terms strikingly similar to Bell's own. His sense that impressionism was a precursor to an art-machine, for example, is itself a precursor to Pound's proposition that the cinematograph had done away with the need for impressionism altogether, just as it is a continuation of that vein of *fin de siècle* thought which conceived of impressionism as a mirror-like empiricism. Similarly, the argument about impressionism's creative self-sufficiency has parallels in the writings of Symons, Hulme and Ford. For each of these writers, the impression conveyed shades of feeling too fine, too individual and too private to be accommodated by the rigid rhetorical framework of public morality. It seemed to entail a creative refashioning, rather than an impersonal reflection, of the raw material of experience; it could even suggest a total severance from the exterior world (as in the case of Symons). Indeed, Bell's own version of this argument is derived less from his knowledge of ancient Sumerian sculpture than from the pamphlets of Whistler, whose aggressively literal interpretation of the nineteenth-century logic of *l'art pour l'art* – his argument that art 'should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear' – had successfully harnessed the impression's powerfully anti-literal potential.[7] In that sense, the contradiction in Bell's thinking not only indicates his subject's apparently endless capacity for self-division and paradox, but also exemplifies one of the recurring themes of this study, namely the manner in which impressionism's ambiguities could be replicated in the appraisals of its viewers.

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This suggests a third and final point. In my Introduction I suggested the usefulness of error as a concept through which to understand impressionist aesthetics and as a paradigm for approaching the literary past. Bell's argument returns us to that idea, underlining its particular relevance to the argument I have been pursuing and indicating its potential application beyond the period of interest of this book. In its self-contradiction, the passage would be a further example of the irregular pattern of vision and revision which has been a dominant concern of this study – from Moore's post-conversion descriptions of his first encounters with the paintings of Monet and Renoir, to Pound's vacillations between opposed conceptions of impressionist style. Moreover, Bell not only points to various perceived errors (the fundamental error of Christian art, the confusion of art with moral purpose, a cast of mind which cares 'more for a theory than for the truth') but seems himself at various moments to become implicated in them, or to make mistakes in the process of identifying others. For example, his suggestion that impressionism marks the apex of a long historical arc towards 'the accurate imitation of objects' might, when stated this baldly, seem almost parodically unsubtle.[8] To judge from the examples that I have been discussing, he would appear to be insensible to, or to drastically simplify, the true range, complexity and variability of his subject, and to comply with stereotype. But in the context of this book, it is from the stereotypical quality of his mistakenness that Bell's argument derives its interest and significance. Literary critics have often theorised impressionism as a form of indefiniteness with a complex grammar of mediation. In my own study, I have not always found this a useful framework. Indeed, in considering impressionism's impacts upon English poetry, it has seemed to me to tell only part of the story, and sometimes to disguise the true irregularity of the subject. Error, stereotype, prejudice, opinion – these were all features of impressionism's literary reception, as they are of history. Rather than exclude them, I have tried to take them seriously as contexts for the poetry surveyed here.

Notes

1 Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick Stokes Co., 1914), pp. 191–2, 193–5. The sagacious Roman is Lucretius.
2 Ibid., p. 23.
3 Ibid. Bell's principal examples of primitive artworks hail from pre-dynastic Egypt, sixth-century Byzantium, Sumer and ancient Greece.
4 Similar arguments were put forward by Wilhelm Worringer, in *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (1907), and Desiderius

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Lenz, in *The Aesthetic of Beuron* (1898). In *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920), Roger Fry stated the position quite clearly when he wrote that 'impressionism marked the climax of a movement which had been going on more or less steadily from the thirteenth century – the tendency to approximate the forms of art more and more exactly to the representation of the totality of appearance' (p. 7).

5 See the Introduction and Chapter 4.

6 See, for example, Amy Lowell's poem 'An Impressionist Picture of a Garden', which she published in her fourth book of poetry, *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919) – a volume which gestures, in both title and contents, to Lowell's belated interest in the culture of *Japonisme* which impressionist aesthetics had helped to inaugurate. For a distillation of D. H. Lawrence's thoughts on impressionism, see his famous essay 'Introduction to These Paintings' (1929), repr. in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward McDonald (New York: Viking, 1972), pp. 551–84. Wallace Stevens said that impressionism was 'the only great thing in modern art', and considered it 'poetic' (see Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (New York: A. Knopf, 1957), p. 290). Many of his poems reflect this interest. See, for example, 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds', 'Of Hartford in a Purple Light', 'Variations on a Summer Day', 'Blue Building in the Summer Air'. One could turn to practically any page of Gertrude Stein's writings and find a reference to, or resonance of, impressionist painting (particularly that of Cézanne). Woolf's interest in impressionist aesthetics has been well documented.

7 Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, p. 35. See Chapter 1.

8 As I have shown at various points throughout this book, impressionist art was understood by many, including some of the original impressionist group, as a departure from the demands of mimesis and objectivity. Moreover, the opposition of the 'primitive' to the 'modern' is not as categorical as Bell suggests. There are numerous art-historical iterations of the same polarity, which was continually reformulated and replenished according to the demands of its changing historical contexts. A version of the opposition had been fundamental to Pre-Raphaelitism, for example, which was founded on a distinction between the 'primitivism' of the medieval painters who preceded Raphael and the too-flawless finish of the painting of the High Renaissance. It would also be integral to one prominent strand of impressionist rhetoric, which conceived of the impressionist painter as a brainless eye, unimpeded by the trappings of personality or ego, recording only waves of light ('Monet is only an eye, but my God what an eye!', as Cézanne remarked). This rhetoric eventually gave rise to the stereotype underlying Bell's own argument, which in that sense appears bound to the same forms it seeks to escape. For Cézanne's quotation, see Phoebe Poole, *Impressionism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 61.

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