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T. E. Hulme and the Twentieth-Century Mind

“When Hulme was killed in Flanders in 1917, he was known to a few people as a brilliant talker, a brilliant amateur of metaphysics, and the author of two or three of the most beautiful short poems in the language.  In this volume [ *Speculations* ], he appears as the forerunner of a new attitude of mind, which should be the twentieth-century mind, if the twentieth century is to have a mind of its own.” [1](file:///Users/jewelbrooker/Library/Containers/com.thelawbox.osxwpd/Data/Caches/1998%20TEH,20th%20Cent%20Mind/" \l "en_1)   Thus remarked T. S. Eliot in April 1924 on the occasion of the publication of *Speculations* , the first published collection of Hulme’s writings, edited by Herbert Read.   Standing at the end of the twentieth century and attempting to understand both the century and ourselves, we are more likely to associate the modern mind with Eliot than with Hulme. But we would be remiss if we did not come to terms with Hulme as a forerunner of such makers of the modern mind as Eliot and Jaspers and Wittgenstein.  More clearly than most of his contemporaries, Hulme realized that the second decade of the century was a watershed in the intellectual history of the West, and more powerfully than most, he articulated the concerns of coming decades in philosophy, in theory of history, in politics, and in art.

Hulme’s importance as forerunner has often been acknowledged, but as Karen Csengeri argues in her introduction to the Oxford edition of his work, it has seldom been understood. [2](file:///Users/jewelbrooker/Library/Containers/com.thelawbox.osxwpd/Data/Caches/1998%20TEH,20th%20Cent%20Mind/" \l "en_2)   The reasons are not hard to find. The first is that, due to his early death in the Great War, Hulme never had a chance to finish and publish his most serious work.  His ideas were well-known in avant-gard circles in London in the years leading up to the war, but known in bits and pieces. Surviving in conversation and intellectual gossip as well as in notes for and drafts of more formal work, his theories about history, human nature, and language became garbled and politicized in the years following the war.  The only writings that appeared in his lifetime were half a dozen Imagist poems, translations of philosophical tracts by Henri Bergson and Georges Sorel, a few essays on art and philosophy, and some journalistic work, mostly political.

The second reason Hulme has been misunderstood is that materials in *Speculations* , the text through which understanding of his thought has been primarily filtered, are poorly edited and organized in a fashion that obscures or distorts his intellectual development.  The papers are undated and appear in sometimes random, sometimes reverse chronological order.  For example, the first essay in *Speculations* , “Humanism and the Religious Attitude,” is an edited version of his very last work, completed just before he fell in the war.  And the last piece, “Cinders,” belongs with his earliest work and outlines a metaphysical and epistemological position that is fundamental to everything else he wrote.  The recurring charge that Hulme is inconsistent can be traced in part to Read’s hodgepodge approach to editing.

A third reason Hulme is often misunderstood is that the papers in *Speculations* do not constitute an adequate or representative sample of his work.  Pieces of his writing continued to emerge over the years, and in 1955, a second volume, *Further Speculations* , was published, edited by Samuel Hynes.  The Hynes volume filled in some blanks, but failed to establish chronology and correct the misimpressions created by the unbalanced and casually edited selections in Read. The large chunk of material on Bergson in *Speculations* , for example, seemed to suggest that the mature Hulme was a Bergsonian. The evidence suggests, on the contrary, that  a young Hulme embraced Bergson because he seemed to offer an alternative to the nineteenth-century nightmare of materialism and dualism.  But as the English maverick developed his own philosophy of classicism based on a realistic assessment of human nature, he came to see that Bergson’s philosophy implied an updated version of the nineteenth-century notion of progress, a notion that was quasi-Romantic and inconsistent with the more classical view Hulme was forming.

*The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme* , edited by Karen Csengeri and published by Oxford University Press, is thus an important work in enabling us to evaluate Hulme’s significance to our century.  It preserves most of Hulme’s extant work, including philosophical fragments and notes.  Csengeri restores texts to their original state and organizes them in chronological order, to the extent that such is possible.  She works with manuscripts when they are extant; in cases in which primary materials have been lost, she necessarily resorts to Read’s faulty edition and attempts to reconstruct Hulme’s original by referring to Read’s letters and notes.  Csengeri places Hulme’s poems first in the collection and then arranges his prose in chronological topical blocks.  This arrangement clarifies not only Hulme’s major interests but the unfolding of his mind and the effect of the war on his thinking.  From her work on these materials, Csengeri concludes that Hulme’s intellectual development was consistent and coherent.  She argues that he tended to be intensely involved in one intellectual field, say, poetry, and then to abandon that and go on to another intense involvement, say, art criticism or philosophy.

Hulme’s poems are few and slight, written for the most part as experiments in breaking away from Romantic poetry. But they are important because in them he virtually invented Imagism, the “school” out of which some of the best work of this century developed.   These finely sculpted miniatures--deliberately restrained, dry, and classical--were admired by Eliot, Pound, and other moderns who are far better known.  In his  “Lecture on Modern Poetry,” Hulme explained that he was striving to carve images, to use language to build up objects.  The first philosophical work in the Oxford collection is “Cinders,” actually an assortment of preliminary jottings on the nature of reality and its relation to language.  The main idea is that the objective world is “a chaos, a cinder-heap” and no single theory or language is adequate to comprehend it.  This paper reveals the essentially nominalistic underpinnings of Hulme’s philosophy, underpinnings that can be traced throughout his work.  A complementary early series of “Notes on Language and Style” reflects the same view of the world and continues the speculations about the relation of language and reality.  Language and theories, he argues, are necessary “toys” without equivalence in the objective world; convictions, he suggests, are made out of language and most can be dissolved into prejudice.

The best known of Hulme’s early essays is “Romanticism and Classicism,” probably written around 1911.  This openly polemical essay is a sort of manifesto in which Hulme announces the end of romanticism and the advent of a new classicism, both in thought and in art.  Many of Hulme’s continuing ideas are caught in this lecture. At the center of his distinction between romanticism and classicism is a clearly articulated theory of human nature.  The root of all romanticism, he claims, is the idea “that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress.  One can define the classical quite clearly as the exact opposite . . . Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant.  It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him” (61).  Although he was never himself a Christian, he saw this as the “religious attitude” and thought of it in terms of Original Sin.  Hulme’s denunciation of “Progress” is part of a cluster that insists on discontinuity as a basic principle.  It is clear enough in his ontological broodings about cinders as the essence of reality, in his nominalism, and in the dispensationalism in his theory of art and of history; in later writings, it surfaces in his insistence that reality consists of essentially discontinuous realms--the mechanical, the organic, and the ethical.

Hulme’s short-lived but important focus on Bergson is evident in a number of papers in the Oxford volume.  By translating Bergson’s *Introduction to Metaphysics*and by lecturing and writing on his philosophy, Hulme helped to introduce him to English readers.  And the philosophy of intensive manifolds, which Hulme appreciated in Bergson, remained important in Hulme’s thinking.  As Hulme’s interest in Bergson was waning,  his interest in French political philosophy, particularly in the conservative thought of Charles Maurras and Georges Sorel, was increasing.  Sorel was an anti-Romantic in art and politics and an absolutist in ethics.  Perceiving the overlap between his own interests and those of Sorel, Hulme translated Sorel’s *Réflexions sur la violence* into English. The preface to this translation is contained in the Oxford edition.  Hulme served as a bridge to the continent in still another way.  He spent some time in Germany and was impressed with the dispensational theory of art in Wilhelm Worringer, especially as outlined in *Abstraction and Empathy* .  In Worringer’s work Hulme found a theory of art history that corresponded in striking ways to Hulme’s own dispensational analysis of modernism in literature.  Hulme continued his journalism after he entered the war, particularly when he was on leave, with his attention naturally turning to the philosophical implications of the Great War. In his last important work, “Humanism and the Religious Attitude,” Hulme brings together much of his earlier thought, in particular his emphasis on nominalism, his principle of discontinuity, and his understanding of human nature.  Unfortunately, he fell in the fields of  Flanners before writing the  philosophical work for which he had been preparing himself.

The Oxford edition of Hulme’s writings brings together virtually all of his  known work including thirteen documents that have not been published before.  The editor includes a long and helpful discussion of Hulme and his context in intellectual history, a headnote with textual history for each essay, an index (primarily of names), and a full bibliography of all of Hulme’s writing.  His letters, quite rightly, are excluded, and his preface to Bergson’s *Introduction to Metaphysics* , less understandably, is also omitted.  These exclusions do not substantially diminish the significance of this long overdue edition of Hulme’s work.

Hulme’s mind, as Eliot said in the editorial quoted at the beginning of this essay, was “the antipodes of the eclectic, tolerant, and democratic mind” of the nineteenth century (231).  His suspicion of language, his nominalism, his dispensational understanding of history, his conservative theory of human nature, and his belief in an objective theory of art can all be traced in Eliot’s criticism.  His ideas also had a powerful impact on Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and others active in early twentieth-century London.  He may or may not have directly influenced  thinkers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, but be that as it may, he clearly anticipated their insights about language and reality.  For the first time now, in Karen Csengeri’s careful edition of *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme* , his work can be read and assessed by persons interested in modernism and the intellectual currents of this century.

**FOOTNOTES**

[1](file:///Users/jewelbrooker/Library/Containers/com.thelawbox.osxwpd/Data/Caches/1998%20TEH,20th%20Cent%20Mind/" \l "enbody_1). T. S. Eliot, “A Commentary,” *Criterion* 2.7 (April 1924): 231.

[2](file:///Users/jewelbrooker/Library/Containers/com.thelawbox.osxwpd/Data/Caches/1998%20TEH,20th%20Cent%20Mind/" \l "enbody_2). See *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme* , ed. Karen Csengeri.  Oxford University Press, 1994 (xxxvi + 489 pages).