The Georgians will inherit the earth...

When Filippo Marinetti published the manifesto for the Futurist movement on the front page of Le Figaro on the 20th February 1909, it signaled, perhaps, not only the first salvo across the bows of traditional ways, but some would say a torpedo into the hull that would eventually allow outdated views and movements to sink without a trace. Futurism, not surprisingly, was the 'future' - it celebrated modernity, the modern age, the rise of the machine - and in so doing was part of the birth of modernism in all its forms. From this trickle of thought came the Imagists, Vorticists, and Modernists who were to so dominate art in the post-war period in Britain.

Pitted against this wave of modernity are the 'Georgian' poets. These were so named because of the anthology of the same name that appeared in 1912 edited by Edward Marsh, followed by subsequent anthologies - Georgian Poetry 1913-15 (1915), 1916-17 (1917), 1918-19 (1919) and 1920-22 (1922) - containing writers such as Rupert Brooke (who helped start the movement with Marsh and Harold Monro), Walter de la Mare, but also eventually Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Isaac Rosenberg. Seen as being traditionalist, out-dated, and above all naive - there is almost a sense of belief that they were exposed as the fraudsters they were by the reality of WW1. As Sherry notes: 'the Georgian sensibility of the prewar years was not only challenged, it was ultimately transformed by the dire realities of the martial experience it was called upon to witness' (V. Sherry, 'Introduction' in The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War, CUP, 2005, p.7)

However, is this fair, and more importantly, from the perspective of the twenty-first century who has the last laugh? To begin with we should note that not all critics are quite so against the 'Georgians'. Hibberd and Onions note (in their superb anthology The Winter of the World) that: 'No other group of writers made a greater contribution to First World War poetry' (H&O, p. xiii). Secondly, the list of poets above contained in Marsh's anthologies clearly shows that to attempt to lump all these writers into a single 'movement' is flawed (de la Mare and Rosenberg would not make obvious bedfellows).

But if we were to consider the general statements that are associated with the Georgian poets, and for the time being accept them, then one begins to wonder why they have come in for such criticism. They have been described as wishing to replace 'nineteenth-century rhetoric and vagueness with plain language, simplicity and realistic, occasionally even violent, detail' (H&O, p. xii - and in this they could be described as 'modernists'). They wanted to deal with 'the plain facts of human psychology', they hated poetic verbosity, and wanted a return to simple poetic diction. They had vitality, realism, a joy of living but also a 'bouyancy and optimism' (R. H. Ross, The Georgian Revolt, Faber, 1967, 259). Finally, they celebrated the simple pleasures of life, nature, and the pastoral idyll.

If we were to compare this with the futurist celebration of the machine, speed, industrialism, then many people today would perhaps today find their sympathies lie more with the Georgians. Consider also Marinetti's declaration that 'We intend to glorify War - the only hygiene giver of the world - militarism,

patriotism, the destructive gesture of emancipators, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and contempt for woman' (F. T. Marinetti, The Founding and the Manifesto of Futurism (Feb 1909) in L. Rainey (ed) Modernism: An Anthology (Blackwell, 2005, pp. 4-5). Is this the ideals we aspire to now? Or would we, if given the choice, subscribe to a more Georgian set of sensitivities? I would suggest the latter. So will the Georgians inherit the earth?

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[1] http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/?p=888