**Hulme, Thomas Ernest (1883-1917)**

T.E. Hulme was an influential early twentieth-century English poet and thinker. Credited by T.S. Eliot in 1924 as the ‘forerunner of a new attitude of mind’, Hulme is understood to have played a formative part in the development of the Imagist doctrine of poetry. He was an early advocate of the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859-1941), a spokesperson for modern abstract art, and was responsible for introducing into the British intellectual scene the ideas of Gustave Kahn (1859-1936), Pierre Lasserre (1867-1930), Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965), Georges Sorel (1847-1922), among others. Hulme was very critical of liberal humanism and described himself as a ‘Tory by disposition’. When the First World War broke out in 1914, Hulme firmly supported Britain’s decision to declare war against Germany.

Hulme was born in Gratton Hall in North Staffordshire in September 1883. On graduating from Newcastle High School in 1902, he won a scholarship to study Mathematics at St John’s College, Cambridge. He was expelled from Cambridge two years later following his taking part in a brawl with the police following the March 1904 Boat Race. Hulme was never to graduate from university: he dropped out from University College London, where he had enrolled to study Botany and Physics in 1904, and his second stint at Cambridge (in 1912) also ended with him leaving abruptly, after becoming involved with the academic Wildon Carr’s adolescent daughter Joan.

Between 1906-08, Hulme travelled to Canada and Brussels. It was during this time that he must have begun composing his earliest known writings, the set of rudimentary notes known as ‘Cinders’ and ‘Notes on Language and Style’. In these notebooks, he recorded the impressions that his journeys through the Canadian prairies had left on him and also speculated on the nature of reality and the uses and effects of language. A unifying theme of these notes is Hulme’s nominalist view of reality, according to which the world is a plurality that cannot be unified or systematised under one philosophical theory, and that language is merely a practical tool that helps us live our lives.

In 1908, now settled in London, Hulme joined the Poets’ Club. At around this time, he delivered ‘A Lecture on Modern Poetry’, a polemical piece deriding ‘old’ regular forms as out-dated and ineffective, and calling for the creation of a distinctly modern poetry based on free verse. This new poetry would deal with the relative, not the perfect, and would capture the poet’s individual impression. According to the method proposed, a modern poem must be built around distinct images presented in juxtaposition. This method of composing ‘visual’ poetry, advocated in various degrees and to various ends by Hulme’s contemporaries (F.S. Flint, Edward Storer, Ezra Pound and other members of the Tour d’Eiffel group), formed the basis of the poetic doctrine of Imagism, formally launched by Pound and Flint in 1913.

During 1909-11, Hulme took up the task of disseminating and defending the work of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. According to Bergson, reason (or the intellect) alone gives a false picture of the world; only instinct or intuition can lead us to the deeper structures of reality. In a series of articles published mainly in *The New Age* [URL 1], Hulme argued that Bergson’s intuitionist metaphysics presented the most original and convincing way of approaching philosophical questions. He praised this popular philosopher’s manner of delivery, the crispness of his prose and the lucidity of his thought, urging his contemporaries to embrace Bergson’s method of intuition.

Simultaneously to defending Bergson’s process metaphysics, Hulme was campaigning for stability and order in politics. In the five political essays he wrote for the conservative weekly *The Commentator* during 1911-12, he attacked the Liberal ideology, which he found based on false romantic beliefs in progress and the perfectibility of human nature. He defended instead the Conservative or classical view, according to which human nature is bad and limited and, therefore, in need of external controls. Hulme expanded on this distinction in his lecture ‘Romanticism and Classicism’ from 1911-12, where he associated classicism with modern ‘dry’ and hard verse.

Hulme then turned to art criticism. Between December 1913 and July 1914, he wrote eight articles on art in *The New Age* as well as a lecture entitled ‘Modern Art and Its Philosophy’. In these works, he championed modern geometric art, especially that of Epstein (works such as ‘Flenite Relief’ [URL 2] and ‘The Rock Drill’ [URL 3]). Drawing heavily on Wilhelm Worringer, Hulme cast a distinction between humanism and anti-humanism: the former is the guiding ideology of the representational art that flourished in the Renaissance; the latter is expressed in the ‘primitive’ art forms and in the abstract geometric art of Epstein and his circle.

In August 1914, less than a week after Britain declared war on Germany, Hulme enlisted in the army. In a series of moving letters he wrote from the front, posthumously published as ‘Diary from the Trenches’, he recorded in vivid detail his experience of trench warfare. These experiences form the basis of ‘Trenches: St. Eloi’, a poem published under Pound’s name in 1915. In 1915-16, whilst recuperating from wounds he had received in battle in April 1915, Hulme composed a series of essays in which he defended the war largely on the grounds that it was a necessary evil. In doing so, he clashed with Bertrand Russell, whom he accused of being a naïve humanist pacifist who failed to recognise the danger posed by Germany on European peace, and against whom he argued that the war was justified by the existence of absolute and objective ethical values. Hulme sought to account for the existence of these values in ‘A Notebook’, serialised in *The* *New Age* in December 1915-January 1916.

Hulme died in West Flanders in September 1917. It is believed that, at the time of his death, he was working on a book on Epstein.

**List of Works**

Hulme, T.E. (1994) *The Collected Writings of T.E. Hulme*. Ed. Karen Csengeri. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eliot, T.S. (1924) ‘A Commentary.’ *Criterion* 2.7: 231–35.

Ferguson, Robert (2002) *The Short Sharp Life of T.E. Hulme*. London: Allen Lane.

**URLs**

[1 *The New Age*] <http://modjourn.org/render.php?view=mjp_object&id=1158589415603817>

[2 Epstein, ‘Flenite Relief’] <http://www.henry-moore.org/hmi/collections/sculpture/flenite-relief>

[3 Epstein, ‘The Rock Drill’] <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/epstein-torso-in-metal-from-the-rock-drill-t00340>