Preface

'Everything that I call grammar on primary notions of Art can be summed up in one word: Irregularity.'[1] Salvaged from a notebook after his death, the aphorism is perhaps the closest Pierre-Auguste Renoir came to expressing a total vision of art. Yet it expresses a paradox, in which the only reliable or regular thing is irregularity itself. 'Despite the apparent simplicity of the laws which preside over their formation', there is a certainty, as Renoir argued in an essay of 1884 (also unpublished), that 'the works of nature from the most important to the most insignificant are infinitely varied, no matter what type or species they belong to', and that 'every type of beauty derives its charm from its diversity'.[2]

A sense of what it would mean to see the world in this way struck forcefully upon the young George Moore, whose thinly fictionalised recollection of his first encounter with paintings by Renoir and Claude Monet at the Third Impressionist Exhibition in 1877 pays special attention to questions of grammar.[3] '[A]rmed with all the jargon of the school', Moore remembered, he and his art school companions 'could but utter coarse gibes and exclaim':

> 'I wonder if the Impressionists are in earnest or if it is only *une blague qu'on nous fait*?' Then we stood and screamed at Monet, that most exquisite painter of blonde light. We stood before the 'Turkeys', and seriously we wondered if 'it was serious work' – that *chef d'œuvre*! . . . 'Just look at the house! why, the turkeys couldn't walk in at the door. The perspective is all wrong'. Then followed other remarks of an educational kind; and when we came to those piercingly personal visions of railway stations by the same painter – those rapid sensations of steel and vapour – our laughter knew no bounds. 'I say, Marshall, just look at this wheel; he dipped his brush into cadmium yellow and whisked it round, that's all'. Nor had we any more understanding for Renoir's rich sensualities of tone; nor did the mastery with which he achieves an absence of shadow appeal to us. [There] was a half-length nude figure of a girl. How the round fresh breasts palpitate in the light! Such a glorious glow of whiteness was attained never before. But we saw nothing except that the eyes were out of drawing.

> For art was not for us then as it is now – a mere emotion, right or wrong only in proportion to its intensity; we believed then in the grammar of art, perspective, anatomy and *la jambe qui porte*.[4]

Moore's recollection indicates some of the forms of irregularity that characterised much impressionist painting: the unmixed pigment, the oddities of posture, the sketchiness, the slanting perspectives, the hazy outlines. It indicates, too, something of the sense of bewilderment felt by those persons schooled on 'the grammar of art' who first encountered impressionist art, for whom Monet's *Turkeys* (1876) and Renoir's *Torso, Sunlight Effect* (c. 1875–6) were seemingly illegible.[5]

I will have more to say about what the grammar of art looked like to contemporaries of Moore and Renoir shortly, but I have chosen to start with these remarks because they introduce the subject of this book and suggest something about the manner in which that subject will be addressed. Moore was one of the first English-speaking writers to register the importance of impressionist art; what he recounts here is not only his unfavourable first impression of the new visual form, but also a portrait of the approximate moment at which impressionist painting began to strike upon English literary culture.[6] This book is a study of such moments: of the impressions made by impressionist painting and aesthetics on individual anglophone writers – particularly on anglophone poets – and of the more general marks left by impressionism on pre-war poetry in English. As such, it joins a vast body of scholarship on connections between literature and art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Specifically, it is an offshoot of (which is to say, related to but divergent from) a rapidly growing branch of criticism which is interested in the idea of impressionist writing.[7] While Moore's own poems do not feature here, it has seemed useful to begin by placing his remark after Renoir's, both to stage the chronology and pattern of exchange implied by my title and because together they illuminate some distinctive aspects of the argument I will be making in this book. The rationale for this argument and its contribution to existing scholarship are dealt with fully in the following introductory chapter, but for purposes of clarity, and to indicate some of the subjects with which the present study is centrally concerned, its salient features are outlined here.

Firstly, Moore's markedly secular confession describes the encounter with impressionist art as a moment of revelation or crisis: as a passage out of false belief into understanding, after which established notions about art no longer seemed tenable, and one rigidly defined grammar of art, to

which certain kinds of rule and regularity were supposed to be central, came to be supplanted by another, more pliable set of values. In fact, there are continuities between much impressionist art (Renoir's in particular) and European painting of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but in this study I have been less interested in correcting how poets apprehended impressionism than in exploring how their responses to impressionism – which at times appeared as a model to be followed, at others as a crisis to be avoided or a mistake to be reversed – shaped their poetry. Accordingly, I have not been concerned with putting forward a theory of what has been called 'literary impressionism'. Rather, I have been interested in understanding how a closely connected and influential group of English-speaking poets – namely, Arthur Symons, W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, Edward Storer, T. E. Hulme, F. S. Flint and Ezra Pound – reacted to (and often against) various forms of impressionism, and with taking these responses seriously as contexts for their poetry. Not only were these poets personally acquainted and moving in the same circles in London; they were also responsive to impressionist art and aesthetics in ways that were productively divergent and poetically formative. My title is meant to indicate the nature of my approach to this subject: in what follows, I consider poetry 'after' impressionism in the triple sense of being written 'later in time', 'in imitation of' and, more broadly, 'in response to', often as a corrective or revisionary form.[8]

This points to a second important issue suggested by Moore's references to grammar, which not only draw attention to the discrepancy between impressionist visual forms and their contemporary language of pictorial representation, but also exemplify the manner in which writers were disposed to understand impressionism in terms of its potential ramifications for literature. As we will see, literary scholars are increasingly wary of suggesting correspondences between literature and other art forms, but it remains true that many writers discussed in this book were concerned to pursue exactly such analogies. Elsewhere, Moore will speak of impressionist art being 'like a newly-discovered Greek text, without punctuation or capital letters', and there is a quite literal sense in which, for him as for many of the poets I shall be discussing, its forms and subjects represented a new language that was available to writers as well as painters.[9] While the practicability of this idea is open to doubt, I have preferred not to disregard or patronise such notions, but rather to understand how they guided the literary endeavours of the poets upon whom they were impressed. One argument I will be making here is that these poets' pursuit of analogy – like their attempt to escape analogy, or to be analogous to opposed or variant

visual forms – cannot, however ill-founded, be divorced from their writings, and that such analogies deserve our attention. So while its focus is not confined to literary responses to visual art, this book often pays close attention to what poets thought about impressionist painting. Beyond that, it is concerned with how their writings relate to an older philosophical language of impressions, which was formative of, and eventually formed by, impressionist art. In considering both issues, it suggests that impressionism was one crucial term – at times, *the* crucial term – through and against which late Victorian and early modernist poetry was defined.

What emerges from my discussion is the first extended account of the transformative impact of impressionist aesthetics upon English poetry.[10] As such, this book aims to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between impressionism and literature, and of the relationship between art and literature during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries more generally. More broadly, I hope that it will refine our comprehension of that interstitial phase of English verse which joins the poetic culture of Tennyson and Arnold to the full-blown modernism of Eliot and Pound. One of the implications of this study is that certain forms of modernist poetry were forged, in part, out of arguments over impressionism; and that certain important poetic engagements with impressionism took place in, and were formed by, the context of late Victorian debates about art, culture and society. To the extent that it impinges on both, this book will, I hope, illuminate one part of the complex and uninterrupted process by which the poetry of the early twentieth century evolved from precepts and practices that became prominent in the late nineteenth century. No study of this subject can be exhaustive: a number of poets – Oscar Wilde, say, or Amy Lowell – whose work might fruitfully be considered in relation to impressionism have been omitted from my discussion for reasons of space and chronology. For those whose interest in the relationship between impressionism and poetry extends in these (or other) directions, I hope that my study indicates the richness to be discovered in the subject.

Finally, Moore's description foregrounds its own divided structure, in which the impulse to ridicule of a former self is found to be ridiculous. Its combination of initial repulsion and belated reverence exemplifies one aspect of the variety of responses that impressionism could elicit – responses which, like the impressionist painters, were diverse in character and changed over time. Another argument I will be making here is that any serious discussion of impressionism's literary reception needs to account for the diversity of impressionist art and its potential range of connotations

during the period. And it must attend also to the ways in which writers were attracted to and repelled by impressionist art – often both, either simultaneously or at different times. Something I have therefore felt it important to emphasise in this study is the deep irregularity, to use Renoir's word, of the art forms typically called impressionist and the poetic responses they provoked, each of which were remarkably varied and variable.

Notes

1 The notebook was found by Jean Renoir, who published its contents in his 1958 memoir-biography, *Renoir, My Father*, trans. Randolph and Dorothy Weaver, introd. by Robert L. Herbert (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), p. 222.

2 Pierre-Auguste Renoir, 'Société des Irrégularistes', in *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874–1904: Sources and Documents*, ed. Linda Nochlin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 45–7 (p. 46).

3 In her anthology, *Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), Kate Flint suggests that the account is of the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition in 1886 (p. 76). Neither Monet nor Renoir participated in this show, however; and while Moore's *Confessions* were first published shortly after the 1886 exhibition, this only makes a connection between the two less plausible, since the description relies on a sense of time having passed. Given that the paintings mentioned here were first shown at the earlier exhibition, and were not on display in 1886, it seems more likely that Moore is recalling the 1877 show.

4 George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888; London: Heinemann, 1917), p. 39. Moore's phrase 'la jambe qui porte' ('the leg that carries') refers to the classical *contrapposto*.

5 During Eugène Guillaume's tenure as director of the École des Beaux-Arts from 1865, students were obliged to learn geometrical drawing. This would be the case for all schoolchildren following Guillaume's 1879 proposals to reform primary education, which were actualised by the Jules Ferry Laws of 1881–3. Guillaume was fond of describing his method in terms of grammar, as when he suggested that 'Drawing [is] but a single language which rests upon certain formal principles and rules, these having a grammatical character.' See Eugène Guillaume, 'L'enseignment du dessin', in *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d'instruction primaire*, ed. F. E. Buisson, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1887), I, pp. 684–9 (p. 688). The article aims to elaborate 'une grammaire pour le dessin'.

6 In a 'Preface' to the *Confessions* published in 1917, Moore claimed that they contained '[t]he first eulogies written in England [of] Manet, Degas, Whistler, Monet, Pissarro' (p. xi). For further early responses, see Flint, ed.,

Impressionists in England; and Ruth Berson, ed., *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874–1886, Documentation*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1996), I: *Reviews*.

7 Recent examples include the following studies: Todd K. Bender, *Literary impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Garland, 1997); Tamar Katz, *Impressionist Subjects: Gender, Interiority, and Modernist Fiction in England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John G. Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Nicholas Freeman, *Conceiving the City: London, Literature, and Art 1870–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Adam Parkes, *A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on Modern British and Irish Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Aimée Israel-Pelletier, *Rimbaud's Impressionist Poetics: Vision and Visuality* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012); Daniel Hannah, *Henry James, Impressionism, and the Public* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2013); Rebecca Bowler, *Literary Impressionism: Vision and Memory in Dorothy Richardson, Ford Madox Ford, H.D., and May Sinclair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Jesse Matz, *Lasting Impressions: The Legacies of Impressionism in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Michael Fried, *What Was Literary Impressionism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018). A fuller historiography is given in the Introduction.

8 The several resonances of the word 'after' were brought to my attention by Stephen Cheeke's study *Transfiguration: The Religion of Art in Nineteenth-Century Literature before Aestheticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); see p. 187.

9 George Moore, *Modern Painting* (1893; London: Walter Scott, 1910), p. 2.

10 The only study with a roughly proximate scope would be Alan Robinson's *Poetry, Painting and Ideas, 1885–1914* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985).