

POST-MODERNISM IN RECENT AMERICAN POETRY

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“Post-modernism” as a literary-critical term has slowly been gaining acceptance in the study of American poetry. Robert Lowell’s abrupt shift in 1957 to a personal, “confessional” poetry marked a turn away from the intellectual, ironic influence of John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate. The programmatic return of the “generation of 1962” (Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, et. al.) to the founders of the modern movement was carried out for the avowed purpose of escaping from the influence of the poetry of the 1930’s and 1940’s. The latter group of poets provides what is perhaps the best working example of post-modernism, since their very use of modernism as a literary-historical accomplishment necessarily involves an overcoming of certain early modernist assumptions, if only so as to avoid repeating the poetry immediately following the work of the “generation of 1912.”

While there are sufficient historical and literary factors to insure that a relevant poetry of fifty years after the modernist revolt would show a significant difference from the work of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and, to some extent, William Carlos Williams, still it is interesting to note the degree of confidence with which recent poets approach the acknowledged sources of their own writings. This confidence, and the corollary marked influence of William Carlos Williams on a large part of recent poetry is perhaps justified by what, following Charles Olson, may be called the destruction of the ego-system¹ in contemporary poetry, a statement of principle closely linked with the

1 Charles Olson *Selected Writings* (ed. Robert Creeley). New York: New Directions, 1966, p. 25. (See also below, p. 4.)

felt ability to overcome what Michael Hamburger has called certain "Romantic-Symbolist assumptions" ² at the core of early modern poetry. Simply stated, the Romantic tendency to project the self upon the world through the poem and the subsequent Symbolist absorption of the self into the poem, abandoning any attempt at a direct connection with the world, in favor of an "absolute" poetic statement, was combined with the modernist need to give poetic expression to the shifting nature of modern life, wherein even the personality of the poet had lost its status as a stable frame of reference.

The instability of the personal ego, of the "empirical self", had led, in the development of poetry from Baudelaire through Symbolism, to an increasing emphasis on the "poetic self," seeking to substitute for the lost security of tradition and the integral personality by the creation of an absolute poetic statement.

The modernism of Eliot and Pound stood in sharp contrast to the decadent aestheticism of much of the poetry that preceded it. They sought to win back a measure of poetry's relevance to the phenomenal. However, this very confrontation with the real necessitated a still greater dependence on the poem as absolute poetic statement, on the fundamentally conservative vision of the projecting imagination of the poetic self. The inevitable tension between an essentially absolutist poetry bound to confront reality only through its own systematic existence as a poetic artifact, and the artistic brilliance displayed in balancing these two polarized elements, created a poetry of revolutionary power and intensity.

This tension and the resulting poetry were established at the expense of several inevitable contradictions. The cult of masks and of impersonality which Pound and Eliot took over was essentially based on an uneasiness about the poet's "empirical self." This uneasiness found its way into the prevailing concepts of poetic language and poetic tradition. The poet himself was seen as the "namer," the creator of new meanings, even at the expense of the intrinsic meaning of

2 Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970, p. 34 et passim.

wordst and as the defender of a cultural tradition distinct from the realities of the pluralistic, materialistic civilization around him.

While a discussion of the particularities of language in Eliot's and Pound's poetry is beyond the scope of this paper and also not as important to their relationship to modern poetry as the question of the "Poetic self," still it is perhaps necessary to mention in passing that their participation in the Romanticist aesthetic of the transcendence of the self in a poetic confrontation with reality is modified to the extent that the language of their poetry must bear the double responsibility of capturing the set poetic self's immediate perception of this reality while at the same time going beyond the subjectivism of Romantic poetry. This reflects an almost universal post-Romantic scepticism about language's capacity to render the self stripped of all its empirical accidents, a scepticism of great creative potential in overcoming the verbosity of late Victorian poetry, but ultimately one which sees language as subject to the poetic ego. Furthermore, for both these Modern Masters, the relationship of the poem qua poem to the world was posited in terms of an essentially utopian poetics of the imagination, in the service of a "tradition" still to be created or rediscovered in the very alienation of the poem from tradition caused by the effect of modern society, and totally in opposition to the pluralistic materialism of the age. The extreme dramatic power of Eliot's and Pound's poetry is attributed to this tension between the poem as projection of the poetic imagination and the inevitable rejoining of the poem as language-act with the social continuum of reality.

Eliot's reduction of the poetic self to the terms of a neo-classicist external reference in traditional orthodoxy and Pound's shifting masks of *personae* have provided some of the greatest poetry of this century. Yet Eliot's very disciplined self-negation has precluded his being more than an implicit source for contemporary poetry, which has been unwilling to take on his relentless conservatism, and Pound's essentially personal attempt to infuse tradition with a totalitarian order of his own making has been, fortunately, ignored by recent poets, who

preferred to use the multiplicity of models his various "poetic selves" set up. In both cases the self-advertised return to these Modernist Masters on the part of post-modernist writers has involved less the intensity of the poetic ego projected into the poem, and far more the poetic statement in its relationship to reality.

One way to approach the particulars of the post-modernist "austerity" is in its dynamism -- "art as process" as Charles Olson has called it.³ For the Black Mountain poets under Olson, this objective dynamism is primarily a technical attempt to "get rid of the lyrical interference of the individual ego."⁴ The "open field" technique of Olson's "projective verse" uses the lyrical first person as a vehicle in the process of apprehending objective realities; with a new stress on "place" and "things," since this writing is of a sort which must "move in the field of its recognitions"⁵ Perhaps the major philosophical premise behind this poetry is its refusal to see itself as objectively "outside" the real, in some sort of observing capacity. It is interesting to see how this poetic philosophy makes use of the Mallarmean capacity of poetic association to free poetry from the "dichotomy of mind and things,"⁶ but without the symbolist refusal to include the empirical self' (this freedom of association, when applied to poetic imagery also applies to Bly's poetics of the "deep image.")

One more point about the projectivist's call for non-interference of the individual ego is the reversal of the crisis of language present in post-Symbolist European and American poets; where they sought to project the self unmediatedly into poetry, post-modernist poetics assumes the humanism of language and goes on to concentrate on an essentially naturalistic poetics.

M. L. Rosenthal, who is admittedly more sympathetic to poets like Lowell where the presence of a poetic self attempting the con-

3 Charles Olson, *op. cit.*, pp. 46, 24.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

5 Robert Creeley, Introduction to *The New Writing in the USA*. London, 1967, p. 22.

6 Hamburger, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

tinuation of the Romanticist-Modernist tradition of "transcendence of the self" is more obvious, still points out both the use of modernism in Olson and the consequent non-egotistical "deviation" from his models. "It is perfectly true," Rosenthal writes, "that what Olson calls 'projective verse' is very far neither from Pound's *periplum* nor... from Eliot's 'objective correlative.' The terms are shifted, however; from attention to the sequence of images and other concrete effects to any form of externalization of the speaking psyche by way of the medium of language."⁷

Robert Creeley, of all the Black Mountain poets perhaps the most taut and sparse in his writing, is an interesting illustration of the principles of field composition, since his poetry deals mainly with inner processes. The almost total refusal of metaphor links Creeley to the European anti-poetry following Brecht, with a similar, if more interiorized, reduction of the self in order to maintain its presence in the poem. In Rosenthal is somewhat backhanded comment "the theater of occurrence of Creeley's poems is a minimal one ... the few shuffling steps of an actor pretending to dance."⁸ I believe Creeley would agree with Rosenthal's comment that he and Olson share "an insistence on that almost hidden, untranscended self as the key, after all, to value, in an effort to rearrange the universe around a shrunken version of the self."⁹ However, the criteria underlying the felt necessity of this approach to poetry are vastly different. Rosenthal sees Creeley in the tradition of projecting the self upon the world in poetry, but, in the sort of "energy transfer" Olson's projective verse calls for, there is an assumed de-emphasis on the poetic self in favor of an attempted apprehension of the conditions of reality.

For Creeley, both the form of poetry and the poetic subject are necessarily changed in poetry that is written more or less as an objective field, itself concerned with the conditions of objective reality.

7 M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 145.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

In neither phase will the imagination be assumed to use the poem to capture reality. Rather, the emphasis will be put on the poem as present object dealing with things as they are.

Creeley borrows from Williams the belief that poets *need* the literal things of an immediate environment, wherewith to acknowledge the possibilities of their own lives. Williams, in his introduction to *The Wedge*, says :

Therefore each speech having its own character, the poetry it engenders will be peculiar to that speech also in its own intrinsic form ... When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them without distortion which would mar their exact significance-into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses.¹⁰

The presence of a perspective totally different from Rosenthal's is evidenced in Creeley's choice of excerpts from the "Projective verse essay:"

On the poet's relation to the form of his poetry :
From the moment (a poet) ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION, puts himself in the open he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares for itself. Thus he had to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined.¹¹

By extension from the poetic form to the question of the poetic *subject*, a further shift away from the conception of poetry as a projection of the self in search of transcendence is evidenced in the following "Projective Verse" essay excerpt :

... The objects which occur at every given moment of

10 Creeley, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

11 Robert Creeley, "Notes apropos 'Free Verse'" in *Naked Poetry* (ed. Stephen Betg and Robert Mezey). Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1969, p. 186.

composition (of recognition we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, must be handled as a series of objects in a field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being.¹²

For Creeley, "subject" as a conceptual force or order has given place to the literal activity of the writing itself.

Creeley's poetry of the self and the changes in it has been characterized as poetry of the "inner tightrope."¹³ By plumbing the depths of the self in its perceptions of the world, Creeley comes to a sort of situational presentation of this self's capabilities of interpersonal relationships.

To turn to an example of Creeley's spare, tense poetry of the self, things, and the "other", all encompassed in projective verse technique, the poem "Thinking" provides us an example of the progression from disembodied thought, through a confrontation with things outside the thinking self, to the "transformed" self.

THINKING

Had not
thought
of it ...

Had nor thought
nor vacancy--

a space
between. Linkage :

12 Creeley, Introduction to *The New Writing in the USA. op. cit.*, p.163.

13 Joel Oppenheimer, "The Inner Tightrope" In: *Lillabulero*, #8 (Winter 1970) pp. 51-53

the system, the
one after another--

Though the words
agree? Though
the sounds
sound. The sea,

the woods, *those*
echoing hills.

Even in a wood
they stood--

even without sound
they are around.

Here and there, and
everywhere.

All you people
know every thing !

All you know you know.
Hence nothing else to ?

--Laughs at
that dichotomy.

E.g., the one again
from another one.

Hold it--
to unfold it open.

He wants to sit down
on a chair

he holds in the air

by putting it there.

He wants to sleep in a bed
he keeps in his head.

The day was gathered on waking
into a misty greyness. All the air
was muffled with it, the colors
faded. Not simply then alone--

the house despite its size is full
with us, but an insistent restless
sense of nowhere enough to be
despite the family the fact of us,

What does one want—more, what
do I say I want. Words give
me sense of something. Days I find
had use for me, how else one thought.

But the nagging, the dripping
weather All the accumulation,
boxes of things piled up the grey
seems to cover, all the insistent junk.

One comes to a place he had not thought to,
looks ahead to whatever,
feels nothing lost but himself.

The title word effects an ambiguity in force from the beginning of the poem : had not thought of “it” and had not thought of “thinking.” The elipsis of the first section leads to a continuation of the theme of thought, by a chaining of word meanings, resulting in the subtle transformation “had nor thought nor vacancy.”

In the phrase “Linkage :/ the system, the/one after another-” the very technique of the poem is made manifest, while the succeeding section serves to pull this making parallel of the process of thought

and the process of the poem into the poem's initial ambiguity :
"Though the words/*agree*? Though/the sounds/sound."

As if in response to the unreduced "vacancy" which blocks the correlation of words and thoughts, the poem as "Linkage : / the system, the/one after another-" begins to make a progressive/regressive forward motion. The first two sections of the poem seem to be concentrating on the almost irreducible distance between thought, as manifestation of the self, and things exterior to the self. The linkage maintaining the development of this theme and poem's progression through it is, of course, itself maintained by strictly verbal word-parallelisms, but it is expressive of an ambiguity which strikes at the heart of the belief that if the words "agree" the thought will match the world exterior to the self.

The poem progresses into still another zone, that of other people, in a mocking upbeat parody of the vocabulary of the previous section. Since there is no direct reference to people in this section, however, the verbal links to the previous section, and the "they" which leads into the next zone of the poem, serve to make a partial equating of people and things, at least in the still unreduced thought of the poet.

The next zone covers the relationship of the self to others-the narrator cannot share the smug self-confidence of others' thought, but must constantly reflect on its inherent limitations. This solipsistic attitude is parodied in the next interlude-zone in which the fact of the separation from others and from things is refused the consolation of the imagination. The poet wants "(...) to sleep in a bed/he keeps in his head." but the process of thought has pushed the confrontation with the world and with the naive thought processes of others so far that this escape into the creative imagination is no longer possible.

The final zone of the poem-event brings together the themes of lack of perception of things, the indefinite "nowhere" of interpersonal relationships, the incessant need for words, however treacherous, and the final paradox of an almost imperceptible movement of promise as yet unfulfilled, "ahead to whatever," seeking the unstable continuum that is the area within which the poetic quest of the self must

take place.

Sharply opposed to the emphasis on technique and the reliance on the American tradition, which he believes is too restrictive, psychologically narrow and overly rhetorical, Robert Bly's "deep image" movement counters the overplaying of the imaginative poetic ego in the poem brought on by this "rhetorical" approach to poetry by emphasizing the associative power of subjective imagery. Again, however, as in the post-modernist Black Mountain poem, the image is not to be manipulated as metaphor for the poetic imagination. Rather, its status as a vehicle for the expressive self is maintained and, as in "projective verse," the poem is built around the images associated by their very intrinsic literal existence.

Bly sees himself as a part of a liberating tendency to free the unconscious in poetry, a movement endless in human history except in the West for the period from the end of the classical Greek era until Blake, Novalis and Rimbaud.

Bly notes that poets like Blake and Novalis first tried to widen their range of association and turned to new forms to fit this wider psychic dimension. The American Modernists of 1912 exploited the European opening of the unconscious and the new freedom of imagery, but without having to fight for this freedom. For them it was still a bit too much a device for projecting their limited concerns with the self onto the relatively stable framework of language.

He agrees that the literalism of poets like Creeley has enabled them to create new dimensions of form to fit this "objectivist" content, but deplors their lack of daring in mapping out new zones of the psyche.

We have not yet regained in American poetry that swift movement all over the psyche, from conscious to unconscious, from a pine table to mad inward desires, that the ancient poets had, or that Lorca and others gained back for poetry in Spanish. Why not? Every time

we get started, we get side-tracked into technique.¹⁴

If much of Robert Creeley's poetry may be said to reflect the often tortuous pace of delimiting the presence of the self in the poem, then Robert Bly's poetry of the "deep image" may perhaps be seen as as a deepening of the presence of the self in the poem. This deepening is carried out through the use of images reflective of things outside the perceiving imagination, but linked to it by the presence of the poet in the poem, providing a focus for the ordering of these images.

THE CLEAR AIR OF OCTOBER

I can see outside the gold wings without birds
Flying around, and the wells of cold water
Without walls standing eighty feet up in the air,
I can feel the crickets' singing carrying them into the sky.
I know these cold shadows are falling for hundreds of miles.
Crossing lawns in tiny tows, and the doors of Catholic churches;
I know the horse of darkness is riding fast to the east,
Carrying a thin man with no coat.
And I know the sun is sinking down great stairs,
Like an executioner with a great blade walking into a cellar,
And the gold animals, the lions, and the zebras, and the pheasants,
Are waiting at the head of the stairs with robbers' eyes.

In the poem, the the fact of the actual presence of the poet is accentuated by the repeated "I can see; feel" patterns, where this presence is a vehicle for joining the external world to deeper resources of the psyche. The almost routine use of metaphor and similie is sharply juxtaposed with the images contained in these devices. It is almost as if Bly were determined to show that allusion by verbal image patterns an be used to make even the most hackneyed technical devices viable. The projective verse tecnique of purely verbal linkages

14 Robert Bly, "Looking for Dragon Smoke" in *Naked Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 163.

is replaced by an interrelationship of images designed to illuminate each other by virtue of the inherent risk of their own individual intensity. Consequently, Bly's poetry is technically less daring than that of Olson or Creeley, where creativity is seen more as a function of dissociation of language than of association of image patterns.

The poem opens with a tangible visual image, "gold wings without birds," moves on to an expression of tactile sensation induced by an auditory image, and then extends outwards and downwards in a rush of spatial imagery in the next two stanzas.

Each of the last two stanzas is introduced by an "I know" pattern, and from one to another the imagery becomes progressively more fantastic. Yet, at the same time, each stanza's imagery is consistent with the respective outward and downward directions the darkness takes in that pattern, and each also contains a self-consistent set of psychic images that could be motivated by the coming of the night after a clear October's day. In a sense, the ability to "know" what the poem expresses depends solely on the incantatory precision of these images, their ritual calling up of the night, of that darkness which ironically accomplishes knowledge.

Bly's poetry is able to sustain the active presence of the "empirical self" by virtue of its attempt to go deeper into this self, and because of the poet's confidence in the more primitivist modern tradition of Trakl and Lorca from whom his poetic style gains much of its inspiration. For Bly, the poets in the European modernist tradition effected a more radical turning away from the discursive, the "reasonable" in poetry, because they did not restrict themselves to the "technical" problems of poetic language; yet, at the same time this "psychic" revolution is seen as ultimately conciliatory, since it does not distinguish between ordinary communication and poetry as much as modernism in English-language poetry did, preferring instead to see communication as a wider thing, one which can be enhanced by the power of the poetic image.

Despite the profound theoretical differences separating the Black Mountain and "deep image" schools of poetry, in practice some of

their poetry comes to be rather similar. For example, the very presence of the of the self in Robert Creeley's poetry which Rosenthal finds so interfering, surprisingly enough often opens onto a psychic freedom similar to the "deep image" poets. The "deep image" school, for its part, also uses the empirical self as a vehicle in poetry, especially in their political poems.

Standing somewhat between the technical "objectivism" of projective verse and the subjectivity of Bly's deep imagery, the poetry of Gary Snyder affords an interesting perspective on the sort of postmodernist poetry that is beginning to reclaim the rights of the poetic imagination. Snyder's poetry is derived from American Beat poetry, but lacks its theatrical tendencies, and as such resembles the poetry of Creeley or Bly in its use of the empirical self. In Snyder's case, this is effected by his extremely acute sense of place, and by the wider dimensions of poetry implied by the interaction of the self and its physical situation. Snyder's poetry is technically indebted to Pound, but differs sharply from Pound in its anti-dramatic concept of civilization that goes beyond the more cultural preoccupations of Pound's work.

Snyder has entitled one of his collections of poems *Myths and Texts*, not only to show the extreme naturalistic esthetic he operates in, but also to reveal the almost anthropological concern for the wider implications of civilization that can be evoked in poetry. He comments on the nature of a poem as follows :

For me every poem is unique. One can understand and appreciate the conditions which produce formal poetry as part of man's experiment with civilization. The game of inventing an abstract structure and then finding things in experience which can be forced into it. A kind of intensity can indeed be produced this way but it is the intensity of straining and sweating against self-imposed bonds. Better the perfect, easy discipline of the swallow's dip and swoop, "without east off west." Each poem grows from an energy-mind-field dance, and has its own inner grain. To let it grow, to let it speak for itself, is a large part

of the work of the poet.¹⁵

Robert Bly has commented favorably on Snyder's poetry, seeing it as the manifestation of three main tendencies : Snyder's extremely "western" sensibility, his respect for civilization in the widest sense of the word, and his deep affinity with the poetic discipline inherent in the classical Chinese poetry he has studied and translated. In a sense, Snyder's expansion of the concept of "civilization" has provided a relatively stable "tradition," allowing for an extension of the powers of the imagination in the expression of those half-forgotten, half still-undiscovered "myths" that are somewhere beyond the traditional scope of culture. What keeps all this from slipping into the merely fantastic, is the precision which Snyder brings to the evocation of the self in his work : no matter how far his poetry may ultimately extend, it seems always securely based on a sense of physical interaction with the immediate situation.

Snyder's poetry seems to let a parallel course of locale and self run, until they, paradoxically, meet in a wider vision of the self and of the world. Traditional dramatic expression is sacrificed in favor of a more subtle interaction of person and place, in a "rythym" of the movements of physical work or of a journey.

The implications of this sort of poetry for the modernist tradition are detailed in a comment by Charles Altieri, writing on Snyder's "ecological" poetry :

The poem then becomes an enclosed space that is not a limiting space; relationships are manifest without being forced and without reduction of or tension between any of the elements. This lack of tension is important because it distinguishes Snyder's lyrics from the modernist tradition with which we are familiar. In so much as his poems are based on dialectic and juxtaposition Snyder remains traditional, but the lack of tension leads to radically different emotional and philosophical implications. Yeat's gyres are a perfect emblem of the traditional

15 Gary Snyder, "Some Yips and Barks" in *Naked Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 357.

dialectic. The elements held in relation by the typical Yeats poem are in violent, often unresolvable conflict. Similar senses of the heroic enterprise lead Pound and early Eliot to their belief in the importance of traditional cultures and Eliot to his ultimate reliance on a transcendent still point. For Snyder, on the other hand, the purpose of the poem as dialectic is to reduce tension by affirming the opposites' need for one another. Snyder, then, does not require heroic enterprise; reconciliation of the opposites is possible for all because the reconciliation need not be imposed; it exists in fact. Man does not have to transcend nature he has only to recognize how that flux itself generates meaning.¹⁶

Perhaps the most important point for the future of poetry in this tradition is Snyder's use of extremely personal details to suggest the possibility of a linkage between the imagination and his expanded view of civilization.

BURNING THE SMALL DEAD

Burning the small dead
 branches
broke from beneath
 thick spreading
 whitebark pine.
 a hundred summers
snowmelt rock and air
hiss in a twisted bough.
 sierra granite ;
 Mt. Ritter—
 black rock twice as old.
Deneb, Altair
wind fire

16 Charles Altieri, "Gary Snyder's Lyric Poetry; Dialectic as Ecology"
In: *The Far Point*, #4 (Spring/Summer 1970) pp. 61-62.

In this poem, a moment of introspection felt while burning branches reveals a stillness that is in flux, carrying the poet, by virtue of his presence at this almost ritualistic moment, to the point where he can join the physical reality of this moment to something far different and beyond the immediate situation, yet still for the purpose of joining the two, and not merely to escape from one into another. As Altieri points out in his analysis :

The process of the poem up to the last line is a continual pushing outward in time and space until the contemplative mind reaches the stars Deneb and Altair which combine age, the coldness of stone, an immensely large body of fire and the appearance of mere points of light. The last line then creates a fusion of two forces: it is a return to the limited space of the burning branches, but it is also a continuation beyond the stars to a kind of essence of fire. We are present in a particular locale, still contemplating the physical distance of the stars, and gradually moving into a third windy fire that unites the two spaces in the recesses of the mind.¹⁷

Given this area of shared accomplishment, it may be said that the great achievement of the "generation of 1962" is to have regained some measure of confidence in the important relationships between the poet and the world. They have sought expression for wider dimensions of reality upon which the imagination can focus. One measure of the success of this attempt may be derived from the fact that a younger generation of poets, born ten to fifteen years after the members of "the generation of 1962" is already using their work in an effort to create a "post-wasteland" literature.

17 Ibid., p. 63.