OCASO PRESS ARTICLES: MODERN POETS

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This pdf compilation covers articles on important Modernist poets.

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A Vision and the Seer's Mantle: Reassessing the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

Introduction: The Poetry

Student summaries put the mainstream view admirably:

'Yeats is the greatest poet in the history of Ireland and probably the greatest poet to write in English during the twentieth century; his themes, images, symbols, metaphors, and poetic sensibilities encompass the breadth of his personal experience, as well as his nation's experience during one of its most troubled times. Yeats's great poetic project was to reify his own life — his thoughts, feelings, speculations, conclusions, dreams — into poetry: to render all of himself into art, but not in a merely confessional or autobiographical manner; he was not interested in the common-place.' {1}

Though Symbolism was a French movement in art and literature, formally introduced to English readers by Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, {2} Yeats had anticipated its themes by his first collection.

Crossways (1889) opens {3} with:

The woods of Arcady are dead,
And over is their antique joy;
Of old the world on dreaming fed;
Grey truth is now her painted toy. (*The Song of the Happy Shepherd*)

Already there is the appeal to a lost world of ancient imaginative truth — superior to drab reality ('sick children of the world', as he calls it later in the poem) — the appearance of esoteric symbols in the Rood and Chronos, and indeed in W.B. Yeats's views throughout his life:

There is no truth
Saving in thine own heart

For words alone are certain good

My songs of old earth's dreamy youth

And he called loudly to the stars to bend
From their pale thrones to comfort him

In the guise of the simple countryman, WBY has adopted the robes of the magus: the natural world will submit to him, and that magic he will perform through his sorcery of words.

Yeats had drawn on earlier English traditions, notably Blake, Shelley and Rossetti to say more than immediately meets the eye through an imagery of symbols. Some were traditional — rose, sea, tower — and others were of his own devising, becoming more complex and interrelated in later poems. Through the works of Madame Blavatsky and others, by attending séances and by mixing in theosophical circles, Yeats came to see the Anima Mundi as a reservoir of

everything that has touched mankind, aspects of which may evoked by symbols. Inherent in these views was the doctrine of correspondences, the doctrine of signatures, and the doctrine of magical in connotations and symbols which have power over spiritual and material reality. {4}

When Modernism conquered academic and literary opinion after WWII, there was a natural desire to enlist WBY in its forward-looking movement. His larger views on Ireland and its social emancipation were emphasized, as were his increasing use of everyday language and speech rhythms, and of cinematic approaches, one image following another without much connecting text. All are well documented. The pre-Raphaelite detail is pruned back and made more effective.

There was man whom Sorrow named his friend,
And he, of his high comrade Sorrows dreaming,
Went walking with slow steps along the gleaming
And humming sands, where windy surges wend: (*The Sad Shepherd*)

Midnight has come, and the great Christ Church Bell
and many a lesser bell sound through the room;
And it is All Souls' Night,
And two long glasses brimmed with muscatel
Bubble upon the table. A ghost may come; (*All Soul's Night*)

The exquisite music of the earlier verse with its subtle

phonetic patterning and word inversions becomes more natural, the diction more matter of fact — *The Song of the Happy Shepherd* and:

When the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim grey sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night. (*The Stolen Child*):

I met the Bishop on the road
And much said he and I,
Those breasts are flat and fallen now,
Those veins must soon be dry; (*Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop*)

The first twenty lines of *In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz* simply float images on the screen of memory:

The light of evening, Lissadell,
Great windows open to the south,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful. One a gazelle . . .

But at a deeper level, Yeats becomes a Modernist in his championing of the artist's viewpoint unmediated by social understanding, and by his use of private memory and mythology to assert that artistic creations do not represent reality but in some sense embody reality.

Poems should not express anything but themselves. They should simply be. {5}

'When I try to put it all into a phrase I say, "Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it." I must embody it in the completion of my life.' {6}

With recognition also came less attractive aspects: an entrenched belief in his own judgement and an aristocratic disdain for the common herd:

'When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poet's corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board Man of the revolution and that somebody has put his worst and most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum . . .'{7}

'I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war . ..' {8}

But, despite the studies and critical outpourings, Yeats didn't *look* modern, and to the last he remained committed to a Symbolism that was peculiarly his. Most verse writers compose in verse, moreover, when the lines already on paper serve to direct, shape and give birth to future lines. In contrast, Yeats pondered matters deeply by writing innumerable drafts in prose and then verse, and nothing he started was ever abandoned. The approach gave him

freedom to arrange thoughts, but also posed difficulties in finding appropriate metrical expression. Thoughts were often replaced by images, therefore, without connecting explanation, so that even his best poems can suffer from abrupt changes of direction, tone and concluding thought.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise now and go, for always night and day
I hear lake water rippling with low sounds on the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey, //
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Anticlimax: adding little to poem.

The Wild Swans at Coole

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build, //
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away.

Rather lame ending: more, surely, could be said of the country house that had supported and culturally nourished the poet through his middle years.

The Second Coming

A generally successful poem, though there are thematic breaks at these line endings:

Are full of passionate intensity //
Surely the Second Coming is at hand. //
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds //
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, //

And a few problems. Why 'ceremony of innocence' and 'vexed'? 'Indignant desert birds' is a vivid phrase, but few birds, alas, throng the desert wastes.

Sailing to Byzantium

There are many problems with this celebrated piece, {9} notably: What are the monuments exactly? Why celebrate bodily decrepitude? 'Perne in a gyre' makes sense only in Yeat's *A Vision*. The next phrase — 'It knows not what it is;' — seems innocuous, until we ask what the 'It' is — the heart, the dying animal, the aged man? Why 'artifice of eternity'? Byzantine artists did not make mechanical birds. 'Of what is past, or passing, or to come.' About everything, presumably: how? What knowledge or insight does the poet possess that the lords and ladies would want to hear? What is the 'commend all summer long' saying but perhaps that the generations renew their brief mortality? Yet that's a little oblique: it's not that the generations are dying (they're being renewed), but generation as a process involves death,

a point that cuts across the theme of the stanza.

I see these as flaws, shortcomings that keep intelligent readers from fully enjoying the poem, and which a little more work would have corrected. But why did Yeats create these problems in the first place? Because, I suspect, he saw himself the medium at a séance, receiving important messages that had to be conveyed verbatim. In time, when Yeats continued to ignore the matter, (as did the other founders of Modernism in their own work), the difficulties became a distinctive and necessary part of modern poetry. The poet wasn't at fault. It was language itself that was faulty. A vast critical movement sprang up in later decades to show that this was necessarily the case, when poets were simply being more perceptive and honest than writers in more mundane professions.

But to continue with the better-known poems:

Leda and the Swan

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop.

How does the air have blood? The poem ends just when beginning to say something interesting.

Byzantium

For Hades's bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path.

Is comprehensible only through 'A Vision'.

That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

Has a power that every verse-writer will envy, but doesn't make sufficient sense. Even readers' guides can be more ingenious than persuasive. {10} The dolphin apparently represents fidelity, sex and joy of life in Greek mythology. Very well, but why torn? How is mortal life torn by fidelity, sex and/or the joy of existence? Dolphins often appear in Greek art and legend, of course, but their significance is in fact various and contested. 'Because the sea represents mortal life, it is tormented by the awareness of time passing which is marked off by the gong.' {10} For most poets and readers, however, the sea is a symbol of restless eternity, and gong, unfortunately, evokes only the call to lunch or dinner in old-fashioned hotels, though we could perhaps imagine, thinking of Javanese music, some sonorous ritual in Byzantium if we don't take our history reading too far.

The Circus Animals' Desertion

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

The poem, usually regarded as Yeats looking back on his career now that his poetic gifts (ladder) were failing, {1} is difficult to square with what we know of the man. He was writing strongly to the end, and remained an anti-materialist, where symbols and emblems continue to exist in a larger spiritual world, whatever the preceding lines might suggest:

Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.

What is Yeats saying? That he was beguiled into loving artifice (of the stage) rather than what the artifice stood for? Or that the emblems themselves were substitutes for the real things, presumably the masterful images of pure mind? Somewhere implicated in the sentence are emotions, their display and artifice, but how they relate is not clear. Nor in fact honestly depicted. Were the brute animal passions ('rag and bone shop of the heart') all that the aged Yeats had left? He was certainly active in pursuing woman through his later years — his affairs were numerous and not too unedifying — so that 'lie down' clearly doesn't mean quiet acceptance.

Of course, if 'rag and bone shop of the heart' is indeed Yeats' phrase for those very affairs, for their brute animal nature, then the poet is not being too gentlemanly.

But the larger difficulties are these: If we have to consult specialist guides to understand the poems, they will not make immediate sense to most readers. If those guides, furthermore, suggest readings that make even less sense, we must either give up attempts to fully understand the poem and happily ignore the difficulties:

'It only seems obscure if we try to interpret what we should be content to enjoy. And he added, "It is precisely this desire to interpret instead of to feel, to look for a meaning which is not there, that leads the critics to call symbolist poetry obscure."' {11}

Or look deeper. Possibly Yeats's *A Vision* held the key. Until recently, *A Vision* remained a literary curiosity, an embarrassment to academics and fellow poets, a hocus pocus whose sole importance had been to keep the man magisterially alive and writing. *A Vision* is now receiving scholarly interest, {12-13} though rather as an anthropologist will explore the myths and rituals of an Amazonian tribe — with informed and critical interest, but not belief. But was Yeats really so gullible as to believe in séances and astrology? He didn't quite say. The 1937 version of the book includes, 'Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of the sun and

moon. . . To such a question I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by spectacle as all men must be in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped me hold in a single thought reality and justice.' {10} Real only when overwhelmed by spectacle, symbolically real, a geometric skeleton or convenient mental prop? For all his gifts as talker and revolutionary, Yeats the thinker could be remarkably elusive.

A Vision

Occult matters were nonetheless central to W. B. Yeats, justifying the select audience and providing depth to his imagery. By 1892 he was saying 'If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would The Countess Kathleen ever have come to exist. The mystical life is the canter of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.' {14}

Yeats's interests were of his time, but still influence how we read his poetry. Most scientists are adamant that psi activities cannot occur, and that the evidence must therefore be nonexistent or fraudulent. Yet the evidence does exist, in many thousands of well-documented studies. {15} Astrology is likewise flatly rejected by science, though the supposedly damning research {16} may be flawed. {17} Or rest on

doubtful bases: personality measurement, for example, against which astrologer's analyses are often compared, itself suffers from severe problems of theory {18} and application. {19-20} Astrology does not see itself as a science, moreover, as readings are not independent of participants, time or outside circumstances. {21} Some see astrological readings as a form of divination. {22} Small but statistically significant confirmations have been found by Michel Gauquelin {23} (also contested by the scientific establishment) and by John Addey, {24} but they only marginally support astrology. Astrologers tend to see their art as a language, however, a highly technical language with its own belief sets, skills and accepted practices — not in these respects unlike literary criticism, the reader may be bemused to learn.

Then there is the personal element. Evading the difficulties, a text for students sensibly calls *A Vision* 'a mystical theory of the universe, which explained history, imagination, and mythology in light of an occult set of symbols', {1} but that vision was put together from only those of Georgie's automatic writings that would generate a complete system, {25} which is a dangerous way of proceeding. The world views of Spengler or Toynbee, long since passed from vogue, did at least marshal evidence, and the more speculative astrological systems, which can be found in any good New Age bookshop, are closely documented with references to authorities and extensive case notes. *A Vision* has none of these.

Yeats was a Symbolist poet, and those symbols enabled Yeats, it is generally held, {9} to give fresh expression to complex meanings, widen his frame of reference, and fuse intellect with imagination in a concrete image. But how seriously are we to really take the symbols? As my introduction on TextEtc {26} puts it:

'Symbolism in literature was a complex movement that deliberately extended the evocative power of words to express the feelings, sensations and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness. Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-98), the high priest of the French movement, theorized that symbols were of two types. One was created by the projection of inner feelings onto the world outside. The other existed as nascent words that slowly permeated the consciousness and expressed a state of mind initially unknown to their originator.'

'Mallarmé painstakingly developed his art of suggestion, what he called his "fictions". Rare words were introduced, syntactical intricacies, private associations and baffling images. Metonymy replaced metaphor as symbol, and was in turn replaced by single words which opened in imagination to multiple levels of signification. Time was suspended, and the usual supports of plot and narrative removed. Even the implied poet faded away, and there were then only objects, enigmatically introduced but somehow made right and necessary by verse skill.'

But Yeats the poet never faded away, and indeed his symbols grew more evocative, precise and rich in associations, (as does astrological language, incidentally: no doubt one reason for its appeal to the poet). Yeats's symbols are also of two types, universal and personal and it is the second — the rose (women, beauty, Ireland) and the tower (Yeat's home, loneliness and retreat) — that can baffle the uninitiated, though they also give depth to poems featuring Helen, Maude Gonne, swans, his daughter and future of Ireland. But all operate through Yeats the seer and arbiter of spiritual significance. That seems to me the secret of his power. By themselves, the subjects of his poems are less than revelatory, inconsequential even, but that dreamy voice of authority invests them with something that lies beyond everyday experience. {4}

To find his symbols, Yeats went to romantic literature, folklore, mysticism, theosophy, spiritualism, astrology and Neo-Platonism before devising a symbolic system of his own. *A Vision* sees time as 'gyres' representing opposing cycles, each lasting two thousand years. The *Second Coming* therefore relates to the antithetical civilization which will come with the third millennium, personified in the rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem as anarchy, horror and the drowning of innocence overrun the world. That 'coat of mythological embroidery' in the last poems is accordingly where a colloquial but ceremonial nakedness prevails. {4}

Is this true? *The Tower* exhibits a close consistency of outlook and theme, each poem benefiting from others in the collection, but postulating the tower as an esoteric but empowering symbol may be overstating matters. Art, after all, in its most general conception, aims at fullness and fidelity to human experience, and Symbolism can hardly claim that with the uninstructed common reader. Even 'The New Criticism', which discounts anything but the bare words on the page, and does not require poetry to provide truth, must concede that some outside criteria will be relevant: to be successful, a serious poem cannot entirely affront common sense. {27} Naturally, because modern poetry is on school and university syllabuses in the English-speaking world, it is right and proper that Yeats's name should appear, with reasons for that appearance, but the reasons given can seem special pleading, more hagiography than critical analysis. We can say that *A Vision* makes sense of Yeats's later poems, and that the work itself is important because it encouraged Yeats to go on writing strongly, but that is a purely circular argument. If Yeats was deluded in writing A *Vision* he was deluded in writing his later, supposedly more important poems that call on *A Vision* for their sense.

The essential point, I think, is that Yeats' poetry is an adjunct of the man himself. It works within certain parameters, one of which is the circle of Yeats's beliefs, these being derived from his reading and occult experiences. The authoritarian personality, which served him well as

leading spirit of the Abbey Theatre, gave him the necessary self-confidence, indeed taking himself so seriously that his more uncharitable contemporaries called him a poseur, which his poet's dress and mannered readings rather illustrated. Nor was he a modest man: only the greatest of thinkers would understand him:

There is not a fool can call me friend,
And I may dine at journey's end
With Landor and with Donne. (*To a Young Beauty*)

It seems that must bid the Muse go pack,
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend (*The Tower*)

Translation

Yeats lacked the humility that characterizes the good translator. He made very free use of his own interests in translating from the Greek of Sophocles, though often with striking, indeed beautiful lines:

Pray I will and sing I must,
And yet I weep — Oedipus' child
Descends into the loveless dust.

But the translations could take on a character quite foreign to the original. {28} The famous stasimon of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (lines 668-719), which is close {29} to: {30}

Colonus, stranger: here is calm

in limestone white and woven shade:
a land of horses, thick with tales
of loveliness that none dispute.
Far from sun’s or tempest’s harm,
in wine-dark ivy through the glade,
our constant guests, the nightingales,
pour out their ever joyful sound.
Sacred too is each leafed thing
endowed with berries and with fruit
as, nymphs attending, reveling,
Dionysus walks this ground.

Here bloom the crocuses in gold,
and on their graves the white narcissus
guards the Goddesses of old
from dewed awakening, dawn to dawn.
And through this flows the Cephisus,
unendingly, from fountains drawn:
its stainless waters daily trace
their fecundations on the plain,
so blessing it with quick increase.
The Muses cannot hide their face
nor Aphrodite ever cease
to visit us with golden rein.

There is a gift more versatile
than famed in Asian countries grows
or on the Dorian Pelop’s isle:
we speak of grey-leafed olive trees

those self-renewing nourishers
of children, giving us our ease
but terror to our spearmen foes.
Our youths are not its ravagers
nor may the aged with their hand
destroy this bounty of our land.
Inviolate, they’re never felled
but in Athena’s eyes are held
sleepless in her grey-eyed stare,
as too in Morian Zeus’s care.

Another praise we have to tell
is for our mother city, writ
in glory of the son of Cronus,
with might of horses, might of sea,
the god Poseidon, such is he
who to master horse has shown us
how to keep with iron bit
their powerful anger in our thrall.
More prodigal to us as well
he's given us the oar to meet
the hand that hauls us over seas,
giving it a wondrous ease
to follow on the rise and fall
of the Nereids' myriad feet.

Became, in Yeats' rendering: {31}

Come praise Colonus' horses, and come praise

The wine-dark of the wood's intricacies,
The nightingale that deafens daylight there,
If daylight ever visit where,
Unvisited by tempest or by sun,
Immortal ladies tread the ground
Dizzy with harmonious sound,
Semele's lad a gay companion.

And yonder in the gymnasts' garden thrives
The self-sown, self-begotten shape that gives
Athenian intellect its mastery,
Even the grey-leaved olive-tree
Miracle-bred out of the living stone;
Nor accident of peace nor war
Shall wither that old marvel, for
The great grey-eyed Athene stares thereon.

Who comes into this country, and has come
Where golden crocus and narcissus bloom,
Where the Great Mother, mourning for her daughter
And beauty-drunken by the water
Glittering among grey-leaved olive-trees,
Has plucked a flower and sung her loss;
Who finds abounding Cephisus
Has found the loveliest spectacle there is.
Because this country has a pious mind
And so remembers that when all mankind
But trod the road, or splashed about the shore,
Poseidon gave it bit and oar,

Every Colonus lad or lass discourses
Of that oar and of that bit;
Summer and winter, day and night,
Of horses and horses of the sea, white horses.

Yeats rearranged lines, and many of his couplets are somewhat contrived: 'Who finds abounding Cephisus / Has found the loveliest spectacle there is.' Then, to introduce his Irish preoccupations with horses of the sea, he continued with 'Because this country has a pious mind / And so remembers that when all mankind,' which is fairly disastrous, adding a Sunday school note to the rendering. There follows 'lad and lass', which has a Shakespearean echo (and needs the unhappy discourses-horses rhyme), and is not found in the original, though doubtless working towards the white horses. Yeats was probably attracted to the white or shining with which the chorus opens, and, rather than relate it to the white limestone country of Greece, delved back into Irish mythology and conjured up waves breaking in sea horses. 'The wine-dark of the wood's intricacies' conjures up the interplay of dark and light in the woods' depths very well, but 'The nightingale that deafens daylight there' is an astonishing image that unfortunately produces the opposite effect of what's needed, which is a sense of quietness and safety.

In short, the play became more Yeats than Sophocles, but effective poetry all the same while we accept and respond to its author's mythologies.

Weaknesses

I have been trying to say where the greatness of WBY's poetry lies, which seems often in what is attempted rather than achieved. He was not particularly prolific, and many of the better pieces are still somewhat flawed or incompletely realized. As a craftsman, Yeats had obvious weaknesses to overcome. He was not an inventive rhymer:

To rhyme with 'crowd':
Whereon a thing once walked that seemed a burning cloud (*Fallen Majesty*)

To rhyme with 'hag':
The moon in a silver bag.

To rhyme with 'hoof'
At Kyle-na-no under that ancient roof

And with 'while':
Are but a post that passing dogs defile (Both from *A Coat*).

He was not always a good critic of his work: lines surviving into collections could be remarkable inept.

Run till all the sages know.
We the great gazebo built,
They convicted us of guilt. (*In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz*)

But on the credit side, Yeats had a gift for exquisite phrasing, often varying the pacing within the iambic meter:

The woods of Arcady are dead,
And over is their antique joy; (*Crossways*)

Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream? (*The Rose of the World*)

Far-off, most secret, and inviolable rose (*The Secret Rose*)

The woods mirror a still sky; (*The Wild Swans at Coole*).

One that is ever kind said yesterday:
Your well-belovèd's head has threads of grey. (*The Folly of Being Comforted*)

And for the memorable phrase:

For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand. (*The Stolen Child*)

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands, *(The Song of the Wandering Aengus*)

Which became more enigmatic later:

Ignorant and wanton as the dawn. (*The Dawn*)

Come build in the empty house of the stare. (*Meditations in Time of Civil War*)
Man's own resinous heart has fed. (*Two Songs from a Play*)
The nightingale that deafens daylight there, (*from Oedipus at Colonus*)
Monuments of its own magnificence (*Sailing to Byzantium*)
Mad as the mist and Snow (*Mad as the Mist and Snow*)

And sometimes didn't come off:

Colder and dumber and deafer than a fish. (*All Things Can Tempt Me*)

But most telling is the muffled thunder of threatened violence:

And clamor in drunken frenzy for the moon. (*Blood and the Moon*)
The swan drifts upon a darkening flood (*Coole and Ballylee 1931*)
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea (*Byzantium*)

And grandiloquence:

Nor know that what disturbs our blood
Is but its longing for the tomb. (*The Wheel*)

The old perplexity an empty purse,
Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse. (*The Choice*)

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,
The sort of beauty that I have approved. (*A Prayer for My Daughter*)

The mature poetry of W.B. Yeats is couched in that solemnity, verging on grandiosity. Much seems unwarranted, a cheque drawn on his future status, the great magus, Nobel laureate and foremost poet of his time, but also part of the self-created personality of William Butler Yeats, and one that readers simply have to accept.

But always about Yeats, as about many of the Modernist poets — to the extent that Yeats is truly a Modernist {32} — there hang suspicions of pretense, doubtful scholarship and unearned authority. Passing events, even the inconsequential, became portentous, heavy with significance. {33} Later poems with their elaborate symbolism of the rose, tower and the like grew more ambitious, certainly, but arguably not better. From the outset, Yeats's poems tended to pronounce on matters, albeit magnificently, rather than to probe or persuade. The dialogue was with himself, with his inner musings. We have to read each poem with his whole corpus in mind, i.e. see the attitudinizing as foibles of an irascible but often impressive old friend. The *Crazy Jane* poems in particular are enjoyable because they are by Yeats: they do not stand well on their own merits: a clipped, unmusical style and in questionable taste, though Yeats had no reason to bless the

Catholic Church. Later poems are generally denser, but not necessarily better, and *The Second Coming*, for example, which is largely successful, was in fact written 16 years before its publication in 1921. Yeats was an unusually conscientious writer, and that so few poems are not without flaws points to large blind spots in his self-critical abilities, to that authoritarian sense of infallibility that his growing success encouraged.

The Symbolist movement itself is harder to assess. It has few proponents today, outside devotees of the occult world. {34} Yeats was its last important representative in English poetry. Some parallels are provided by metaphor theory, where metaphors organize our experience, uniquely express that experience, and therefore create necessary realities. {35} Though such realities are not grounded in logic, but in the beliefs, practices and intentions of language users, these metaphors are overt and universally used, and in that respect quite unlike the rarefied symbols of Yeats and other Symbolists. Nonetheless, in some much-contested way, through the many different belief-worlds that poets inhabit, language is the enabling mechanism: as Yeats put it, 'words alone are certain good'. That innocent proposal, severing expression from rational content, would create much mischief in the various poetry schools that followed.

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Ezra Pound and the Cantos

Introduction: Poet and Reformer

Almost everything about Ezra Loomis Pound (1885-1972) is controversial — his poetry, economic theories and political views. A genius in the first category and a crackpot in the others is the general opinion, but I shall try to show that the picture is much more complicated, with successes and failings in all areas of life, and indeed a strange consistency throughout. Ezra Pound was a complex, opinionated and self-driven man, but above all committed to the view that writing to the highest standard made for a civilization worth belonging to. His views on poetry and literary criticism have carried later opinion with him, but not those on economics, Fascism and anti-Semitism. In these Pound was repeatedly on the wrong side of history, and even Modernist poetry, which he did so much to further, came with its inbuilt costs. {1}

Biography

Biography is woven into Pound's writing. Though born in Halley, Ohio, he was not the Western grifter his enemies sometimes pretended. His mother came from New York. His father worked at the Philadelphia Mint. Pound was always restless, however, moving on to new pastures in London, Paris and Rapallo. After the disastrous war-time broadcasts and his incarceration in Washington, Pound returned to Italy, but the *Cantos*, with which he continued to occupy himself, were less confident and successful. {2}

Between 1908 and 1920, Pound was arguably the greatest influence on Modernism in the English world, as poet, critic and the befriender of genius, but his work was not widely known until Eliot edited his *Selected Poems* in 1928, or really understood until Hugh Kenner's study *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* in 1950. {3} Before concentrating on the *Cantos*, Pound contributed to journals, founded societies and produced 21 books, which received mixed though not wholly unfavorable reviews. Obscurity and excess of allusion were the chief complaints, to which were added 'envy' of the literary establishment in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) and 'errors' in translation in his *Cathay* (1915) and *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919). Though his flamboyant egotism alienated many, Pound was also tireless in proselytizing for new writers and new ideas. W.B. Yeats turned over his work for the young man's suggestions in 1912, {4} and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* of 1922 owes its success to Pound's ruthless pruning.

Imagism

{5-9} is the term given to Pound's work in this period, important for the personalities involved — including James Joyce and William Carlos Williams {10-11} — and the manifestos of the movement, which became the cornerstones of Modernism, responsible for a much taught in universities until recently, and possibly for the difficulties poets find themselves in now. The Imagists stressed clarity,

exactness and concreteness of detail. Their aims, briefly set out, were that:

1. Content should be presented directly, through specific images where possible.
2. Every word should be functional, with nothing included that was not essential to the effect intended.
3. Rhythm should be composed by the musical phrase rather than the metronome.

Also understood — if not spelled out, or perhaps fully recognized at the time — was the hope that poems could intensify a sense of objective reality through the immediacy of images.

Imagism itself gave rise to fairly negligible lines like:

You crash over the trees,
You crack the live branch . . . (*Storm* by H.D.)

Nonetheless, the reliance on images provided poets with these types of freedom:

1. Poems could dispense with classical rhetoric, emotion being generated much more directly through what Eliot called an objective correlate: 'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must

terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.' {12}

2. By being shorn of context or supporting argument, images could appear with fresh interest and power.

3. Thoughts could be treated as images, i.e. as non-discursive elements that added emotional coloring without issues of truth or relevance intruding too much.

Difficulties

It is doubtful, first of all, whether specific emotion can be generated in the way Eliot envisaged. Emotive expression is a complex matter, as every novelist or playwright soon discovers.

There is also the difficulty of isolated images. Human beings look for sense wherever possible, and will generally supply any connecting links that the poet has removed, correctly or incorrectly. Poems are not self-sufficient artifacts, moreover, but belong to a community of codes, assumptions and expectations, which we must learn when reading any literature. Context is important.

Finally, there is happy assumption that poetry is largely an expression of emotion, and that the intellectual content is immaterial. The briefest course in aesthetics will show the difficulties. Is emotion conveyed or evoked? Is emotion a purely individual matter, or can we talk of emotion appropriate to the situation, when social codes are involved?

And what do we make of the general experience of artists who find that emotion emerges as the work develops?

Undeterred, however, the three streams continued as follows.

1. Snippets of mimicry, wide-ranging allusion and striking images gave beauty and power to lyrical passages in the *Cantos* and *Briggflatts*.

2. Disconnected images passed through stridency into gaudy irrationalism as Imagism developed into Dadaism and Surrealism.

3. Abstruse conjecture and name dropping became a necessary ingredient of contemporary poetry — which might have exposed the shaky scholarship of both poet and reviewer had the content been taken seriously. In general, it wasn't, however, and poetry in its more avant-garde aspects developed into a rarefied and exclusive game.

Academics knew this well enough. {12}

'The imagination offered a type of knowledge superior to that of rational analysis, superior to the empirical discoveries of science. The image in a poem gave the reader a moment of illumination beyond normal apprehension, and so introduced him to a kind of sensibility not to be found in everyday living. Frank Kermode has described these

influences in great detail in *The Romantic Image* (1957), and shown that this emphasis on the image has had a very considerable effect on techniques of literary analysis. The student has been taught to look mainly at the various effects of individual images, and then to consider the interrelationship of images throughout the poem. Many analyses of poems have paid no attention to rhyme, conventions of genre, or syntax, but have concentrated upon the complex pattern of imagery. The implication has been that a poem has an organization of its own, based upon the image, and that ordinary grammatical structure is of comparatively small importance. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, of course, demonstrates this conception of linked images. Such analyses of imagery have been applied successfully to the poetry of the metaphysicals, or to Hopkins, for example, but they have had little to say about the typical Elizabethan sonnet or song, or about the structure of the long poems of Milton, Dryden or Pope.'

wrote C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, {13}

pointing out that Donald Davie had argued that 'language achieves its effects by a variety of means, and one of the most important is by the use of orthodox syntax. . . Language is thought of as an instrument of articulation, a way of establishing relationships like the harmonies of music or the equations of algebra. . . [In] the second attitude, popular among the poets of the 1920's, language is trustworthy only when it is broken down into units of

isolated words, when it abandons any attempt at large-scale, rational articulation. . . "systems of syntax are part of the heritable property of past civilization, and to hold firm to them is to be traditional in the best and most important sense . . . the abandonment of syntax testifies to a failure of the poet's nerve, a loss of confidence in the intelligible structure of the conscious mind, and the validity of its activity". . . Davie requires poets to mean what they say, and to relate their poems to common experience. . . His influence prevents a student from an endless search for new subtleties of interpretation, and sends him to study the nature of genres in particular periods. His emphasis on syntax, and the various types of syntax used by poets, offers new, exciting possibilities for analysis. He asserts the value of mind and rational order, and so offers tools with which a reader can assess the organization of a long narrative poem. He tries to bring poetry back to traditional modes of communication, to make the poet, once again, a man speaking to men.' {13-14}

Development: Pound's Cathay (1915)

Ignoring sinologists, who detest the liberties that Ezra Pound took in translating Chinese poetry, {15} critics have generally praised Cathay, {16} often in extravagant terms. {17} And even if the translations were somewhat free — indeed showing little understanding of China and Chinese literature — the work was beautiful, they thought, some the best verse of its period. That, I suggest, cannot be really sustained. The test of greatness in poetry, or even in verse, is that its achievements cannot be easily matched or

surpassed. If we look at the most famous of his Cathay poems, *Song of the River-Merchant's Wife*: {18}

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.

The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
  As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

We can surely find much to admire, but also note the fragmented nature of the free verse, the uncertain rhythms, and an awkwardness of phrasing. These problems largely disappear if traditional verse is used: {19}

How simple it was, and my hair too,
picking at flowers as the spring comes;
and you riding about on a bamboo
horse; playing together, eating plums.

Two small people: nothing to contend
with, in quiet Chang Gan to day's end.

All this at fourteen made one with you.
Married to my lord: it was not the same.
Who was your concubine answering to
the thousand times you called her name?

I turned to the wall, and a whole year passed
before my being would be wholly yours —

dust of your dust while all things last,
hope of your happiness, with never cause

To seek for another. Then one short year:
at sixteen I sat in the marriage bed
alone as the water. I could hear
the sorrowing of gibbons overhead.

How long your prints on the path stayed bare!
I looked out forever from the lookout tower,
but could not imagine the distances there
held you still travelling, hour by hour.

Now thick are the mosses; the gate stays shut.
I sit in the sunshine as the wind grieves.
In their dallying couples the butterflies cut
the deeper in me than yellowing leaves.

Send word of your coming and I will meet
you at Chang-feng Sha by the mountain walls.
Endless the water and your looks entreat
and hurt me still as each evening falls.

Far more serious than the verse problems was Pound's approach, which was based on a profound misconception, namely that Chinese is a pictogram method of writing where the meaning is directly and vividly evoked by images in the script. Put the characters of sun and moon together and you get the character for bright. Yes, but, unfortunately, very

few Chinese words are of this type, and even in these the average Chinese no more reads the pictures than we respond to the etymology of our words. The Chinese script is essentially logographic, where signs represent morphemes, the minimal element of a word that carries meaning. Such elements also represented unmediated sound in the early history of the language, and elements called 'radicals' had therefore to be added to clarify the meaning. {20-22} But Pound, working from notes supplied by Ernest Fenellosa, was too excited by the notion to take advice, and he combined this supposed directness with a free verse style to create translations that were sometimes excellent, even if establishing an unfortunate orthodoxy of free verse for Chinese translation.

In fact, Chinese poetry is anything but direct, but this misunderstanding allowed the Modernists to strike out in new directions. Where poetry before had been a high art form, with a long tradition and much to learn, the essence of poetry could now be honesty, freedom from encumbering technique, and a stress on surprise (foregrounding) and novelty (make it new). William Carlos Williams was among the first to throw off the constraints of tradition, but the trait appears in many American Modernists, particularly those who dislike western civilization, or what it has become — Bly, Snyder, Kinnell, Wright, Merwyn, {23-26} and others. {27}

Larger Issues

Behind these approaches to a sensory directness, and drawing support from them, are some questionable beliefs:

1. Occam's razor applied to literatures, when the simpler was better, closer to the truth. But poetry is not science, but expression that provides an intense and thickened experience of life. Even in philosophy, where clarity *is* important, attempts to find a simple and logically transparent language have all failed.

2. Complex matters can be expressed in simple structures. This is an assertion of structuralism, unsupported by the evidence, and leads to the simplistic 'isms' of feminism, political correctness and post-colonial studies. It is not how brain physiology suggests we function.

3. Poets have an individual view of the world, which relieves them of wider responsibilities. Again, this is contrary to what we know of older poets, most of whom were involved in the events and issues of their times. The view contributes to the unpopularity of contemporary poetry: the public expects more than unsupported opinion and knowing cleverness: they want something answering to their own experience, or to an experience they could work towards.

Homage to Sextus Propertius

Where Pound did create beautiful verse was in his

idiosyncratic Homage to Sextus Propertius, to which I devote a separate article. {28}

Early Cantos: Analysis

Canto VII is dense with quotation and allusion, but this section (lines 19 to 47) is fairly straightforward: {29}

The old men's voices, beneath the columns of false marble,
The modish and darkish walls,
Discreeter gilding and the panelled wood
Suggested, for the leasehold is
Touched with an imprecision. . . about three squares;
The house too thick, the paintings
a shade too oiled.
And the great domed head, *con gli occhi onesti e tardi*
Moves before me, phantom with weighted motion,
Grave incessu, drinking the tone of things,
And the old voice lifts itself
weaving an endless sentence.

We also made ghostly visits, and the stair
That knew us, found us again on the turn of it,
Knocking at empty rooms, seeking for buried beauty;
But the sun-tanned, gracious and well-formed fingers
Lift no latch of bent bronze, no Empire handle
Twists for the knocker's fall; no voice to answer.

Canto VII is one of the more difficult of the early Cantos, where Pound weaves in echoes of the classical and Renaissance world, contrasting in this section their forceful

vigor with the fin de siècle languor, from which he took refuge in eclectic reading and (less happily) residence in Mussolini's Italy. Pound wanders round empty rooms thinking of Henry James, who acts as a Virgilian guide. We have a description of the man (great domed head, and quotations from Dante {30-31}) and a reference to his manner of talking — weaving an endless sentence, which Pound is also doing.

Many of James's characters were attracted to the sunlit vitality of Italy, and here Pound is noting how overdone is the decor of the world left behind, with its heavy paneling, dark oil paintings and false columns. The section has some excellent touches (old men's voices, a shade too oiled, drinking the tone of things, found us again), and some that are less so (Touched with an imprecision, buried beauty). Overall, a falling tone, with repetitions and a tired emptiness in surroundings and what lay beyond.

Rhythmic Analysis

How is this achieved rhythmically? We first note the stress/syllable counts for the line segments, and show the pauses simplistically as | (short) and || (longer): {32}

1. The old men's voices | beneath the columns | of false marble || 3/5 2/5 2/4
2. The modish and darkish walls | 3/7
3. Discreeter gilding | and the panelled wood 2/5 2/5

4. Suggested | for the leasehold is | 1/3 1/5
5. Touched with an imprecision || about three squares || 3/7 3/4
6. The house too thick | the paintings || 2/4 1/3
7. a shade too oiled || 2/4
8. And the great domed head | con gli occhi onesti e tardi 3/5 4/10
9. Moves before me | phantom with weighted motion | 2/4 3/6
10. Grave incessu | drinking the tone of things | 2/5 3/6
11. And the old voice lifts itself || 4/7
12. weaving an endless sentence || 3/7
13. We also made ghostly visits || and the stair 4/8
14. That knew us | found us again | on the turn of it | 1/3 2/4 2/5
15. Knocking at empty rooms | seeking for buried beauty | 3/7 3/6
16. But the suntanned, gracious | and well-formed fingers | 3/6 3/5
17. Lift no latch of bent bronze | no Empire handle 4/6 2/4
18. Twists for the knocker's fall | no voice to answer 3/6 2/5

The rhythms are similar to those Pound developed for Homage to Sextus Propertius, though quieter and more fragmentary. As in that poem:

Beneath most lines is conventional meter, predominantly iambic in lines 4, 6, 7, 9, 13, 14, and 16, and trochaic in lines 2, 3, 10, 12, 15 and 18. Other lines are more mixed or

indeterminate. If we attend to the underlying meter, then the structure approximates to:

1. hexameter: molossus of old men's voices
2. tercet
3. pentameter
4. tetrameter
5. pentameter: molossus of about three squares
6. tercet
7. duplet
8. hexameter: molossus of great domed head
9. pentameter
10. pentameter
11. tercet: molossus of old voice lifts
12. tercet
13. pentameter
14. hexameter
15. hexameter
16. pentameter: molossus of well-formed fingers
17. pentameter
18. pentameter

And becomes even more regular by regarding lines 3 and 4 as a segmented pentameter, and lines 11 and 12 as a hexameter.

Many of the irregular lines are not irregular at all, but have their own patterns.

The old men's voices | beneath the columns | of false marble ||
And the old voice lifts itself || weaving an endless sentence ||
That knew us | found us again | on the turn of it |
Knocking at empty rooms | seeking for buried beauty |

Imagist Techniques

The passage would benefit from extended rhythmic analysis, but our main concern here is the Imagist technique of having image serve as content.

We can distinguish four interwoven themes: a disembodied reference to OLD MEN'S VOICES, which leads to **memories of Henry James**, ***passages of description associated with old men's voices***, and a *description of Pound's visit*.

1. THE OLD MEN'S VOICES ***beneath the columns of false marble,***
2. The modish and darkish walls,
3. Discreeter gilding and the panelled wood
4. Suggested, for the leasehold is
5. Touched with an imprecision. . . about three squares;
6. The house too thick, the paintings
7. a shade too oiled.
8. **And the great domed head, 'con gli occhi onesti e tardi'**
9. Moves before me, phantom with weighted motion,

10. Grave incessu, drinking the tone of things,
11. AND THE OLD VOICE LIFTS ITSELF
12. WEAVING AN ENDLESS SENTENCE

13. *We also made* **ghostly visits,** *and the stair*
14. That knew us, found us again on the turn of it,
15. Knocking at empty rooms, seeking for buried beauty;
16. **But the suntanned, gracious and well-formed fingers**
17. Lift no latch of bent bronze, ***no Empire handle***
18. Twists for the knocker's fall; no voice to answer.

By combining these simple themes, Pound makes his reflections part of the larger fabric of American expatriate life. We are given old men's voices that drift from the heavy setting (France or England, possibly Flaubert's Paris), which reminds us/Pound of William James (who loved Italy, spending extended periods in Venice). Aspects of James give way to his/an old voice weaving an endless sentence. We/Pound have also made our ghostly visits to empty rooms, and these remind us of James and what he appreciated of Italy. Not a difficult set of associations, and successfully handled. In what sense is it Imagist? Pound has the scene 'speak' by presenting specific images, and intensifying a sense of objective reality through the immediacy of those images. Rhythm is 'composed by the musical phrase rather than the metronome' — naturally so, as Pound wants those rhythms to be part of the

characterization. Compare the quiet first section with the energy ushered in with *We also made ghostly visits*.
The technique is a novelist's, but the sequences marking the turn in and out of flashback have been removed, conflating past and present, and making historical personages a mouthpiece for Pound's views. The dangers are acute — unsupported opinion on one side, and obscurity on the other — but in this passage Pound is successful.
And very probably neither the classicism of Tennyson nor the pastorals of Arnold would have served Pound's aims. Browning would have created characters speaking pages at a time, but there was little demand for verse novels by the 1920s. Even less did the public wish to be preached at with Augustan didactic verse. Pound was not being willfully difficult, but simply developing the opportunities suggested by *Homage to Sextus Propertius*.

Pros and Cons

To sum up, the advantages of the Imagist approach were:

1. Freedom to experiment, evading the traditional restrictions of verse. 2. Avoiding the 'unproductive': anything not contributing to the overall effect could be omitted. 3. Images could be precise or otherwise: zoomed into for telling detail, or blurred for mood and vague association. 4. Quotations could be extended, one calling on another, far more than Eliot achieved in *The Waste Land*. 5. Passages rhythmically beautiful could stay independent of an

overall meter or line structure.

The drawbacks were:

1. Randomness: anything could be included, however pretentious, irrelevant or obscure. 2. Accountability: much has to be taken on trust, dangerous in a poet of Pound's egotism, where all historical characters can become spokesmen for his views. 3. Open-ended nature: constraints of plot and character ensure that novelists check their work for honesty and consistency, but material in the Imagist approach does not have to cohere into a final statement: meaning gradually emerges out of the play of images. The poem is not a map of the world, or any world, therefore, but more the experience of travel, albeit sailing first class.

The Pisan Cantos

Cantos 74 to 84, known as *The Pisan Cantos* because written when Pound was held at the American Disciplinary Training Center north of Pisa, {33} — probably the best known of the Cantos — had a difficult genesis, proofing {34-35} and publishing history. Deprived of his library, Pound had to call on his memories for material, and these not always exciting fragments were woven together in a polyphonic, fugue-like manner. All the Pisan Cantos have received extensive critical commentary and explication, and I simply concentrate here on the famous Canto 81.

The opening 'Zeus lies in Ceres' bosom' merges three notions: the conception of Demeter, passages in the

previous cantos on ritual copulation needed to ensure fertility, and the experience of the sun (Zeus) hidden at dawn by two hills resembling breasts in the Pisan landscape. Then follows another mountain reminding Pound of Taishan accompanied by mists and the planet Venus: 'Taishan is attended of loves / under Cythera, before sunrise'. Then come memories of Spain, a story told by Basil Bunting, and anecdotes of people familiar to him. At the canter is the line 'to break the pentameter, that was the first heave', which is Pound's comment on the Modernist revolution earlier in the century. The goddess of love then returns after a lyric passage evoking the English lyric, 'What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross', and a statement emphasizing the need for humility, possibly Pound's humility at his circumstance, but more probably requiring that his captors show appropriate humility to Pound and his achievements.

Louis Menand {36} called *The Pisan Cantos* 'the finest thing that Pound ever wrote. It's the one place in his work where his learning is fused with genuine personal feeling.' Readers must consult their own responses, but I find the personal reminiscences rather dull, close to name-dropping when they introduce no enjoyable anecdotes. Interspersed with these stretches of reminiscence are Pound's ideogramic images: unexplained, sometimes beautiful, but not contributing much to understanding, even when explained.

Much has been made of the libretto beginning:

Yet
Ere the season died a-cold
Borne upon a zephyr's shoulder
I rose through the aureate sky
        Lawes and Jenkyns guard thy rest
        Dolmetsch ever be thy guest,
Has he tempered the viol's wood
To enforce both the grave and the acute?
Has he curved us the bowl of the lute?
        Lawes and Jenkyns guard thy rest
        Dolmetsch ever be thy guest
Hast 'ou fashioned so airy a mood
        To draw up leaf from the root?
Hast 'ou found a cloud so light
        As seemed neither mist nor shade?
Your eyen two wol sleye me sodenly
I may the beauté of hem nat susteyne
And for 180 years almost nothing.
        Then resolve me, tell me aright
        If Waller sang or Dowland played

But its assertion is a nonsense. {37} A host of fine musicians and poets occupy the 180 years between 1678 and 1858. Why make such controversial statements (or that John Singer Sargent did only 'thumb sketches' before painting 'Dolores')? Even the verse is not without its shortcomings. Is 'enforce' the right word, and does the cloud passage make sense? 'Sunlight' might have made a better metaphor:

Hast thou drawn out from the lute
Such as fashions leaf from root?
Hast thou made what's light and rare,
As sunlight is on rich brocade,
A brilliance woven in the air
When Waller sang or Dowland played?

Or something else, depending on what we think Pound was trying to say. I'm not 'correcting' Pound, only suggesting that Pound's lyrical gifts have been talked up too much. What was so striking in *Propertius*, is now in decline, perhaps explaining why no improved 'Selections from the Cantos' was ever produced. Of the famous section in Canto 81, beginning:

What thou lovest well remains,
    the rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage
Whose world, or mine or theirs
    or is it of none?

Anthony Woodward wrote: {38} 'To call this parody or pastiche on account of its archaic mode is far too crude. It is wonderfully moving in its own right.' Perhaps so, but it's also an odd composition for a poet who wrote: {39}

'No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years

old, for to write in such a manner shows conclusively that the writer thinks from books, convention and cliché . . .'

Everyone thinks from books and convention, of course, especially if they follow Pound's list of recommended reading, but, leaving that aside, the many purposes the lyric serves have been pointed out by critics, generally sensibly, but also missing the point. If the most successful part of the most successful section of the *Cantos* is written in antique verse, then Pound's program has failed. The best sections should be those where Pound's ideogramic method is most fully employed, and clearly they are not.

If these comments seem savage, we should remind ourselves of the enormous influence of the *Cantos* on American poetry, and ask if partisan views are not subverting honest reading. I have no quarrel with older styles but this verse is positively antique — far more than the Edwardian high-minded effusions Pound was rebelling against — unless, of course, the lines are to be taken as parody, which would seem unlikely in the circumstances. Like Yeats, Pound never took himself less than seriously. *The Pisan Cantos* were proofed while Pound was an inmate of St. Elizabeth's in Washington, and here two later sets of *Cantos* were written: *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*, plus the translations *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (1955) and *Women of Trachis* (1956). *Rock-Drill* continues Pound's complaint against mediocrity, corruption and usury, introducing a long list of forgotten heroes. Again there are

attractive passages:

Grove hath its altar
under elms, in that temple, in silence
a lone nymph by the pool. (Canto 90)

And 'dreams of fair women' continue in following stanzas, with an extended allusion to the *Odyssey* in the stanza concluding *Rock-Drill*. Monetary concerns appear in *Thrones*, but the mood is quieter, and exemplars of good governance are found in Europe and China. *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* had professional help in the translation from the Chinese, and is a mixture of lyrical beauty

'Even in water-meadow, dry'
Flow her tears abundantly,
        Solitude's no remedy.

And some strange coinings:

WEN! Avatar, how!

The Sophocles translation is less successful: the brutality is brought across but nothing of the poetry.

Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII (1970), written in Italy, have some serenity but are also incomplete and seem sometimes to express self-doubt.

But here the great project ended. When asked about the completion of the poem in 1962, Pound remarked, 'I have lots of fragments. I can't make sense of them, and I don't suppose anyone else will.' {40} That is probably the experience of most readers, who find the *Cantos* intriguing and even enchanting in small sections, but oppressive, overwhelming and unreadable en masse. It is a poem of continual becoming, of multiple becomings, where one impression will give way to another, sometimes by natural association, but often needing some knowledge of Pound's life and views for understanding, plus a wide working knowledge of cultural artefacts. The Terrell *Companion* {41} contains 10,421 separate glosses that include renderings from eight languages, which seems a heavy imposition on the reader. Understanding doesn't bring appreciation. 'So what? How does that help?' must be the constant response to having allusions ferreted out. The images and thoughts do not deepen emotions, or even cohere, except in the person of Ezra Pound, who is always on hand to explain what perhaps should have been self-explanatory in the first place. Many thoughtful readers have despaired. 'The Cantos can best be understood as the epic of pure aesthetic consciousness (prosperity's most real orchid) attempting to mirror the totality of European culture broadening out into world culture as it decomposes.' {42}

Some were less impressed. '"The Pisan Cantos" is a Fascist poem without apologies.' {43} To Hugh Kenner the facts composing the ideogram were resistant to propositional

formulation and were derived from observed particulars that had no sylogistic connection with each other. George Santayana complained that Pound jumped too much between particulars for connections to be assessed, or even followed, and that the ideograms were simply 'grab-bags' of matters existing only in Pound's own mind. Even Caroll F. Terrell's Companion remarked on 'how little good, finally, such exegesis does, how small a stage it advances us towards an understanding of the Cantos'. As many have pointed out, the poem is polyphonic but lacks overall direction and integration. There are echoes of the *Odyssey* and the *Divine Comedy*, but not consistently so. The voyage or voyages of intellectual discovery are repeatedly lost in thickets of mimicry, satire, documentary, elegies, hymns, vituperation, reminiscences, reportage and whatever came next to Pound's mind. Concepts of order, selection and proportion are relegated to 'an open form', i.e. to a freedom from any overall aesthetic shaping, a notion that would exert a powerful influence on later poetics.

A large critical industry has grown up around *The Cantos*, but the simple truth seems to be that, like Yeats, Pound was not overly concerned by the various experiences readers could have of the poems — experiences that would not necessarily be those of the author, or even remain consistent from reading to reading. Philology he had no time for, and it didn't matter if his allusions proved to be unsound, or his readings of Chinese logograms wildly unlikely. Pound was a reluctant proof-reader at best, fighting

any challenges to his authority. {44} But if Pound's Cantos are admirably and necessarily difficult, as contemporary scholarship contends, {45} they moved contemporary poetry away from the common reader and hastened its decline into an adjunct of literary theory.

Economic Theories

W.W.I destroyed the settled beliefs and customs of the old world order. The Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German and Ottoman Empires disappeared, and a flood of refugees overwhelmed a Europe broken into new and unstable entities. Inflation impoverished the moneyed classes, and was followed by the austerity measures of deflation. Unemployment mounted in the Great Depression, eroding belief in moderate government, and a plethora of new economic theories, once remote from everyday thought, became the pressing hopes of the day, just as they were after the 2008 financial crash. {46} Ezra Pound was not in the least unusual in becoming preoccupied with banking and economic matters, and the movement he espoused, Social Credit, was perfectly sensible, if a little utopian. {47} It still has supporters today, and underlies proposals for a Uniform Basic Income. {48}

Nor was Pound the economic illiterate commonly supposed. The basic problem facing economies of Pound's time faces economies today: how to get banks and financial institutions to serve society in ways beneficial to everyone, {49} to put people before profits. {50} Pound did not master macro-economics, but did sense that something was inherently

wrong in Fed policies. Missing then was what is missing now: a fairer and more efficient system that offered proper incentives, rewarding effort, know-how, co-operation and practical ideas. {51} The Soviet model claimed to empower the people, but in fact ruled by brute coercion, necessarily as revolution had swept away the institutions that governed by assent. {52} Pound put his faith in 'strong men', those like Mussolini who brought vision and wisdom to an Italy in turmoil, still steeped in feudal poverty and backward attitudes.{53}

Pound's confidence was misplaced, and W.W.II shattered his dream of enlightened government. But his basic intuitions were sound. Critics of Neoliberalism point out that the present system is run on debt, and the institutions providing that debt are banks. {54} Because the interest owed has to paid back by borrowers earning a wage in competition with other workers, the system is competitive, inflationary and remorseless in its hunger for labor and raw materials. Mines have to be high-graded, for example, and hard-wood forests are not replanted. {55} Wars are fought for national interests, sometimes dressed up as ethical imperatives, but the root cause is always the financial system that sets men at each other's throats. {56} Matters are discussed in more detached terms today, of course, by professional economists who look impartially at quantifiable matters, {57} and the media who put the ethical case of governments to their citizens. {58} But neither is quite as it seems. Economics has become special pleading to maintain the status quo:

much of its science is bogus. {59} The mainstream media, now largely controlled by corporations, offers shallow propaganda supporting mainstream parties but avoiding the core issues. {60}

Far from being a political crackpot, therefore, Ezra Pound was unusually prescient, though he certainly chose the wrong champions, allowing a crude, tub-thumping rhetoric to blunt his case. No doubt greed underlies usury, but Imperial China cannot be understood in such simple terms. {61} Nor is capitalism a perpetual battle between exploiters and the exploited. {62} Rather than enter into and understand the marvelous complexity of human societies, and base his poetry on that understanding, Pound became the politician himself, over-simplifying matters and appealing to raw emotions — all that poetry is expected *not* to do. But Pound was at heart the crusader, and crusaders, overwhelmed by the rightness of their cause, are apt to lay down as immutable laws what are only approaches to the changing needs of the times.

Fascism and Anti-Semitism

Extreme views were an unfortunate feature of interwar politics. Many progressives aligned themselves with the Soviet Union, but Pound, through his residence in Italy, warmed to the Fascist cause. In Germany the National Socialists had achieved an economic miracle, turning the bankrupt and fragmenting Weimar Republic into the Europe's strongest economy in four short years, {63} and it was not unreasonable to expect something similar in Pound's

country of adoption. Wise and beneficent tyrants made for strong government, {64} and strong government was certainly needed when Mussolini came to power in 1922, after two years of strikes, mass unemployment and food shortages. Mussolini's policies, including the 'battles' of the grain and marshes, aimed to make Italy self-sufficient, and indeed enjoyed some early successes. Food supplementary assistance, infant care, maternity assistance, general healthcare, wage supplements, paid vacations, unemployment benefits, illness insurance, occupational disease insurance, general family assistance, public housing, and old age and disability insurance were introduced from 1925. Over the longer term, however, in ways obscured by state censorship from Pound, the policies worked against the common good. Large proportions of industry were taken into state hands. The Pontine Marshes were drained, but the reclaimed land proved too poor for agriculture. Smaller farmers lacked the means and technology to grow grain in the manner envisaged. The inequalities between the north and south widened, and the main beneficiaries of Fascist policies became the industrialists. {65} W.W.I had impoverished the country, and Italy's involvement in W.W.II was equally disastrous. With defeat came revulsion at the horrific bloodshed and destruction, and across Europe a savage justice was handed out by survivors and victors to the supposed culprits. {66} Pound wasn't treated well, but others fared worse.

Though Pound's anti-Semitism increased with his economic

views, it was present from his first years in London, stridently more than in other writers of the period. The holocaust only became known in the later stages of the war, but both Hitler's and Mussolin's treatment of the Jews were obvious enough, and Pound came eventually to accept the unnecessary and criminal stupidity of his views. But anti-Semitism was not Pound's private lapse into madness. Anti-Semitism was deeply rooted in Europe, woven into centuries of its social and cultural fabric. {67}

Anti-Semitism may also have meant to Pound a world where mastery and rightful authority (especially his own) would be properly recognized, and his former comrades returned from other allegiances (Eliot) or the grave (Gaudier and Hulme). {68} Certainly he never relinquished his Fascist ideology. He identified with Mussolini in *The Pisan Cantos* and gave the Fascist salute when returning to Italy from Washington internment in 1958. Pound had a non-democratic view of art, and was also an obstinate man, not given to making corrections when errors in his work were pointed out, but his reactionary view of history as the doings of 'great men' was integral to his thought, isolating him in a post-war Italy turning to different and more democratic views of government.

In Conclusion

Far from being the visionary in poetry and unbalanced in life, Ezra Pound suffered personality disorders in everything, becoming markedly so during and after W.W. II. So bizarre were Pound's wartime broadcasts that the Italian authorities

supposed he was transmitting in code, and the psychologists who examined him afterwards were not showing kindness in judging him unfit to plead: Pound really *was* mad. He had no idea of the enormity of his folly, or conception of why the academic world was exasperated by his views. The complaints of scholars about his translations was not that they contained 'errors' — Pound was happily aware of that — but that Pound was largely ignorant of the cultures he was transposing to English. Worse were the *Cantos* where quotes had been selected out of context and bent into views that he, Ezra Pound, was determined to present as the one true path to enlightenment. Not only was that dishonest, but pointless. We do not read history to be confirmed in our own small prejudices, but to be liberated from them, to view the different ways that past civilizations have understood themselves and conducted their affairs. Scholars keep careful notes on their reading, and have to if they are not later run the danger of misrepresenting matters, but there are no reasons to think Pound ever did, though it made revision of his *Cantos* next to impossible.

Yet clearly those *Cantos* needed revision: long sections should have been removed and others shaped to make them more telling and engaging. Nor should it have taken too long. Their style is a fairly easy one to write — no meter, rhymes or constant line length — and in some ways too easy to write: the medium does not offer sufficient resistance to ensure the poet properly fights for each phrase. Even *Cathay* and *Propertius* would have benefitted from revision, with

some move to fuller and more literal translation, but either Pound's inflexible sense of purpose stood in the way of any such concession, or his powers were not up to the task. He was spry and forward-looking on his return to Italy, but the years had doubtless taken their toll. To revise properly meant going back on forty years of work, assessing all that he previously read, understood and interpreted, but this immense undertaking had to be left to scholarship, or to the reader who wishes to fully appreciate the *Cantos*.

If Yeats was an occultist first and poet second, and Eliot the critic who also wrote poetry, Ezra Pound was primarily the cultural crusader who wrote exceptionally fine and innovative verse in his formative years but became increasingly the prisoner of his simplistic attitudes. By an irony of fate he would not have enjoyed, Pound's views on poetry, which are overstated and often wrong-headed, have passed into Modernist theory, while his social and economic theories, to which he devoted so much of his life, have been quietly forgotten.

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the whole natural world offers to the poet a collection of bric-à -brac from which he takes selections to represent emotional states. "Direct presentation of the thing" - the image so produced exists to be one side of an equation the other side of which is an emotion. Plainly an eccentric view of the poet's procedure. We can hardly suppose that either the author of the Iliad or the author of Christ, that my love was in my arms / And I in my bed again were collecting objets trouvés in this way. '
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T.S. Eliot: A Critical Review

Introduction: The Wasteland

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* {1} was never without its detractors. For some twenty years after its appearance, the poem was the subject of almost incoherent abuse by older men of letters, who saw it as an undergraduate prank or confidence trick. Even Yvor Williams, as late as 1947 {2}, called it 'broken blank verse interspersed with bad free verse and rimed doggerel' — a judgement that made John Press so angry that he said it 'reveals so crippling an insensitivity to the texture and rhythm of verse that one is tempted to disregard any judgement on poetry that he may choose to deliver'. {3} Ivor Brown, drama critic and editor of *The Observer* called it 'balderdash', all the same, and J.B. Priestley allegedly called Eliot 'donnish, pedantic and cold', adding that 'it would have been better for contemporary English literature if Eliot had stayed in Louisville, or wherever he came from.'

Today the poem is widely accepted as one of the most seminal in twentieth-century literature, and any decent textbook {4} will note the troubling power of the varied imagery, allusion and myth. The Internet alone has many approving and helpful articles, some excellent. {5} But for all its status, and the many thousands of students who must study it every year, is it a great poem? Certainly it's a key poem, iconic of important trends in poetry even today, and one I've read with pleasure off and on for forty years, but

calling it a masterpiece I'm not so certain about. Firstly there is the speed at which it was written: three months. Also relevant is Eliot's disturbed mental state at the time: he later described the poem as 'a personal grouse against life'. {6} Finally came Ezra Pound, who drastically cut the piece into a shape that reflected his ideas, i.e. Pound's rather than Eliot's, of what modern poetry should be. Completely removed were allusions to Eliot's own anxieties, the lengthy narratives, the *Rape of the Lock* parody and traditional forms. {7} Perhaps that was just as well, as much of the original wasn't too good.

'Admonished by the sun's inclining ray,
And swift approaches of the thievish day,
The whitearmed Fresca blinks, and yawns, and gapes,
Aroused from dreams of love and pleasant rapes'

'The sailor, attentive to the chart and to the sheets.
A concentrated will against the tempest and the tide,
Retains, even ashore, in public bars or streets
Something inhuman, clean, and dignified'

But Pound did retain the sections that were novel and arresting. Older critics believed a poem should be understandable, or largely so. There could be a 'fine excess', to quote Keats, and of course a depth beyond what straightforward prose could reach, as there often is in Shakespearean verse. But what *The Waste Land* offered was not profundities but lacunae, sections that floated in from

heaven knows where and trailed off into other tongues.

In time, of course, the difficulties became great fun. American prosperity after WWII saw a vast expansion of literary studies, and Matthiesson's 1935 book, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, was soon joined by mountains of critical erudition. Eliot had added notes to the poem, that were, he confessed, as likely to confuse the reader as enlighten. In 1927 he mischievously remarked: {3}

'I admit that my own experience, as a minor poet, may have jaundiced my outlook; that I am used to having cosmic significances, which I never suspected, extracted from my work (such as it is) by enthusiastic persons at a distance; and to being informed that something, which I meant seriously is vers de société and to having my personal biography reconstructed from passages which I got of books, or which I invented out of nothing because they sounded well; and to having my biography invariably ignored in what I did write from personal experience.'

No doubt the students struggling through *The Wasteland* must have wondered whether such obscurities and lacunae did not extend into the essays collected in *The Sacred Wood*. It was certainly difficult to know what that dry, all-knowing voice was actually saying. If Eliot was seen as one of the more influential of the new critics — and he certainly climbed the commanding heights of his profession — there could be precious little working put down on the page to see

how the master arrived at his ever more imperative distinctions. I'll quote George Watson as his book is now accessible, gratis, on the Internet, and deserves careful study: {8}

'Secondly, "relevance" means relevance to modern poets rather than to modern readers, and Eliot even commits himself openly to this object in the 1935 lecture on Milton: "Of what I have to say I consider that the only jury of judgement is that of the ablest poetical practitioners of my own time." Thirdly, Eliot eschews close analysis in favour of general judgements; his taste and techniques were formed decades before the New Criticism of the thirties, and he never practises the "close analysis" characteristic of that school.'

'These are hardly arguable statements about Eliot's criticism. They go a very little way, however, towards describing what an Eliot essay is like. To do that would require a more impressionistic account, leading to statements that might prove highly debatable, since the rhetoric of his criticism is opaque enough to leave a good deal in doubt.'

But are Yvor Williams' strictures justified? By earlier standards, yes. The lines remaining after Pound's cuts are generally adequate but not overwhelming.

Indifferent blank verse:

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings

Lines that set up wild goose chases after sources:

Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair
Spread out in fiery points
Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.

Rhymed doggerel:

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag —
It's so elegant
So intelligent

And so on. But more important were three challenges to the poetry that had gone before. Poems were no longer things of beauty, or concerned with beauty. Quite the contrary: Eliot's poetry made a cult of ugliness, contemporaries complained. Secondly, poems did not have to make full sense, and a new breed of critics arose to suggest new depths or dimensions or affiliations in the work, a school led by Eliot himself with his formidable learning and intellect. Thirdly, the emphasis shifted from craftsmanship to theory: poems could accept a good deal of the miscellaneous or second-rate, contemporary semantic rubble, in fact, provided the overall shape or intention accorded with what a 'contemporary sensibility' insisted was important.

Little of *The Wasteland* would exercise a MFA workshop today. *The Waste Land* ignores, and happily ignores, that old-fashioned test of good poetry, that nothing is superfluous or unnecessary. We could lose odd lines and sections, I think, without feeling the poem was fatally damaged. But nor can we say, as we often do with contemporary art, that conception is more important than execution, because the conception is rather more Pound's than Eliot's. All the same, however, I'd still prefer to read Eliot's poetry than that of Yvor Williams, carefully crafted though it often is. Why?

The answer has something to do with context, the larger pattern of cultural expectations that the New Criticism regarded as irrelevant. But as George Watson {8} remarked about I.A. Richard's *Practical Criticism*:

'It seems more natural to suppose that all but the simplest poems exist in traditions which dictate in some sense the significance of the poem, and that poems torn from their historical context tend to mean some other thing, or to descend into the merely meaningless. If this is so, then *Practical Criticism* and its record of failures in response is not an indictment of English education — justly indictable as that may be — but an impressive body of evidence to suggest that unhistorical reading is bad reading.'

Indeed I'd go a little further and suggest the 'tradition' is something seem through the prism of our own

understanding. The composition we were so pleased with one evening commonly proves on the following morning to be a grave disappointment. We have to cut out the bad, regrow the lines, and keep coaxing the thing into life without too much subverting our original intentions.

All poets know this, but those who simply read for pleasure — that vital body on which literature depends — can try a little experiment. Open at random a long poem which was once well known but hasn't been read for a while, and immediately start reading somewhere around the middle of the poem. My experience is generally one of confusion: the lines seem odd and uninviting, and it's only slowly that the poem 'comes back in focus'. Reading is a trained response, and the 'rules' differ between types of poetry.

It may help to switch disciplines and look at modern art. I think Matisse is over-rated, but there's no doubt that standing in front of, say, the *Red Studio* is a moving experience, quite different to that gained from looking at an old masterwork. Art critics, who belong to the cozy circle of museums and dealers that maintain prices, sometimes assert that Matisse's skills are the equal of the old masters, or that Picasso's drawings rival those of Raphael. This is nonsense, as anyone with a little art training can see for themselves. {9} Other factors apply, one of which may be what I'd call 'granularity', for want of a better term. In dreams we see a world real enough until we take a magnifying glass to it, and find the impressions cannot be

looked into further. What we see is what we're given, and, unlike real life, we cannot focus on some aspect to explore it in more detail. Something like this is happening in *The Waste Land.* The poem as a whole is giving each word or phrase its significance and emotive power, especially when it's something we've known for a long time, when to our response is added those largely buried memories of who and what we were when we first got to know the work.

One of the more illuminating comments on *The Waste Land* came from Harold Munro, {10} who remarked, 'The Waste Land is one metaphor with a multiplicity of interpretations.' Speaking from within the Modernist camp, John Press {11} added, 'It is his ability to fuse into poetry a multitude of experiences and a wealth of intellectual speculation that gives his verse such range and authority'. It is these two quotes I'd like to develop further.

That range of subject matter probably derives from Propertius, whose 'Odes' Ezra Pound had rendered as *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, his beautiful but idiosyncratic 'translation' that appeared in 1919. That similarity of intention may have been what Pound saw in the first draft of *The Waste Land*, which he drastically pruned, of course, continuing to find a home for Eliot's poetic and critical skills: Eliot became editor of *The Criterion* in 1922, the year in which *The Waste Land* was published. The sometimes difficult and tangled relationship between the two writers is germane to the discussion, but will lead us into areas I don't

want to explore here. Much is unflattering — Eliot's treatment of his wife, Pound's fascism and the mutual promotion of both — but I doubt we shall fully understand who did what exactly till Eliot's private papers are published, if they ever are.

Munro recognized the multiplicity of interpretations, and Press regarded them as 'fused'. Are they?

Only with a lot of critical erudition added, and an erudition that older men of letters thought had no place in poetry. Instead of traditional craft skills that led us ever deeper into an understanding of what was superficially attractive and convincing, the new poetry required scholarly work from its readers. It was they, or critics, or theoreticians who had to supply what was missing — an understanding of those allusions Pound built his *Cantos* of, and the background to those sweeping judgements Eliot generally didn't stoop to explain in his critical articles. Hence the 'granularity' that distinguishes dreams from real life. We can't look deeper into the fabric of the poem because that detail isn't there. Or to put the matter more generously: that's not the way these poems work. They are collages rather than closely-integrated thought.

Many critics see it otherwise, of course, and argue that the traditional skills are self-evident in both writers, a claim that seems to me true of Pound's early work, but less so of Eliot at any time. There are 'traditionally fine' passages in *The*

Waste Land certainly — any literary textbook will point them out — and more so in the *The Four Quartets*. But there are also lacunae and much imprecision posing as profundity. If that seems harsh, look again at standard interpretations of these poems. {11}. Yes, we can compare:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

To Chaucer's opening of *The Canterbury Tales,* but there is no compelling reason to do so. We can agree that:

'For Eliot's speaker, this rebirth is cruel, because any birth reminds him of death. The soil out of which the spring plants grow is composed of the decayed leaves of earlier plants. April is the month of Easter, and Eliot is invoking here both the Christian story of the young god who dies in order to give new life to the rest of us and the many other versions of this myth chronicled by Sir James Frazer in his anthropological work "The Golden Bough" and Jessie Weston in her "From Ritual to Romance".' {12}

But again a simpler explanation of 'cruellest' is probably the sense of lost youth. And so on. Of course it's good material for critical exegesis, requiring the wide leaps of logic that much of today's critical industry is built on, and which I have outlined in *A Background to Critical Theory.*

It is also a technique that tends to superficiality, no doubt producing intriguing poems in a talented writer but pretentious banality in others. Exasperation must be the response of many common readers, and especially those who serve a long apprenticeship in disciplines requiring writers to say exactly what they mean: science, philosophy, the law, etc. Meaning is not a simple matter, as I've labored in the TextEtc website to show — to the bafflement of many visitors, to judge from comments — but there are still rules and common practices that must apply if the work is to achieve what was intended.

Naturally, it's possible to turn matters on their head, and argue that poetry is precisely a language that doesn't make full sense. Or indeed shouldn't make complete sense. Many contemporary poets probably do believe that. But it's not a doctrine espoused by academic life, and seems doubly unfortunate when many contemporary attitudes are controlled by the mass media, making them shallow and commercially orientated. Little of current journalism speaks 'truth to power', and many ambitious poets are moving their opinions from cautious to invisible in seeking university status. Few of the poets we most read would be so craven: think of Milton, Pope or Byron. Even Shakespeare, who knew very well what he could and could not say in the Tudor state, opened the door to a more generous and sympathetic treatment of human character than did his contemporaries. My suggestion is not that poets shouldn't expand their range

and repertoire, therefore, but that many of Modernism's approaches create the anodyne poems that now seem to feature prominently in serious writing. Interesting, intriguing, amusing and a dozen other things, but quite harmless, even at their best. That may be the shape of the world we live in, but we shouldn't pat ourselves on the back for the 'original and challenging' virtues of contemporary literature.

The Four Quartets

Many see *The Four Quartets* {13} as Eliot's best poem, and the greatest philosophic poem of the twentieth century. {14} My purpose here is not to quarrel with that assessment, but only to note how the difficulties mentioned above with *The Waste Land* are carried through into this later work.

In case a personal note helps, the poem was one I read endlessly in my youth, happily but somewhat indulgently, without understanding how fundamental were my difficulties with it.

The critical literature on 'Eliot and the Four Quartets' is too large for me to even start doing it justice. Wikipedia has a modest introduction, {15} and more can be found on the Internet. Here I'll simply concentrate on pointing out some examples of critical hagiography, of reading meanings and excellences into the poem that are really not there.

To start with craft matters: the verse is more accomplished

and integrated than is *The Waste Land*'s. It's no longer so obviously a collage, though ideas, impressions and description are still pasted in, for purposes that make the standard interpretations of the poem, i.e. it is still the same approach though much more astutely carried out. The verse is in both strict and free verse, or commonly something in between, a generally very pleasing mixture if we don't expect too much from its intuitive patterning. The opening lines of *Burnt Norton: Section One* show this fusion well:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

But the lines opening *Section Two* are strict verse, though not particularly distinguished verse, I'd suggest:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.
The trilling wire in the blood
Sings below inveterate scars
Appeasing long forgotten wars.

But different again is what these lines actually mean. Anyone with a little training in philosophy, or even contemporary science, will have a great difficulty with this opening mediation on time. The Buddhist view of

reincarnation is usually suggested, but Eliot of course was a devout Christian, and 'If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable' is an odd way of putting matters, if not simply playing with terms. By definition, as a passage of events, no time is only in the present. 'Eternally' is an oxymoron. And 'unredeemable' — the key word in this passage, perhaps the poem as a whole — is not properly addressed: we have collages of instances and truncated thoughts but no sustained treatment. Yes, we can say that if 'all time is eternally present' there can be no future in which redeem our sins', but that's hardly helpful, and plays with distinctions that human beings have found useful. Salvation means very different things in Christian and Buddhist religions, and neither, I suspect, believe that 'we live in a universe that is perfect and that every moment is preordained and predetermined.' {16}

The following lines:

What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.

Are prose, rather wooden, and originally written for *Murder in the Cathedral.*

Next comes:

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

Which is often glossed as referring to free will, though the reading contradicts the predetermined interpretation earlier: We have free will, which is futile. We can make any choices we want, but they all lead to one inevitable end. {16}

And so on. Let's turn to *Section Two*:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.

Which the helpful rapgenius site admits is obscure but glosses as: {16}

'In one reading, garlic represents the lower, sensual forms of love and sapphires represent the higher, more platonic forms of love, both of which lie at the feet of the "bedded axle-tree" or the cross.'

But again, why make matters so difficult? And in what way can wars be appeased, particularly if already forgotten? Is it man's propensity for sin or violence that we should brood on? Many important issues are touched on, but not properly addressed, indeed evaded. Poetry is not theology, but nor is it playing fast and loose with the usual meanings of words.

I don't want this to develop into an attack on Eliot, whom I still read with a mixture of pleasure and exasperation, but

more a general enquiry into literary tactics: why critics will not ask the obvious questions. So extended and serious a poem surely deserves a comparable assessment, not simple 'commentary' or 'interpretation'.

To go a little further into the poem, Eliot may very well have been searching for the spiritual dimension in writing such things as:

And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at. {15}

But such a response requires 'the eye of faith' and a long apprenticeship. Authorities agree that the further dimensions of the world cannot be learned from books but only through extended exercises under a spiritual master. As it stands, the fourth line comes close to being tautological, of being nothing more than semantic shuttlecock. Such interpretations as: {15}

'The poet like the Creator creates a world that appears real but is always qualified. Only the bird can hear the unheard music because it exists in the same unreal world.'

raise a host of philosophic difficulties, far worse than the vagaries of the line itself. Moving on:

There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.
So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight

In short, matters so important to the poem's theme — indeed to humanity at large — need more than this teasingly solemn air of about to say something important but then not quite getting round to doing so. Perhaps we do stand on the edge of silence. Eliot was a Nobel prize winner, and is still thought by many to have been the greatest poet of the twentieth century. But writers have more important aims than promoting themselves, I'd suggest, one of them being obligations to their readers, the more so when their work gains wide currency.

No doubt the battles over Eliot have been fought long ago, and if *The Four Quartets* are still on the syllabus of innumerable schools and colleges, few contemporary poets, I think, are taking the poem as their own departure point. But perhaps the matter is closer to the financial shenanigans of 2008, which came close to wrecking the world's banking systems, and may do so again. Until that point, and the trillions of dollars in bailout money that might have been better spent on America's infrastructure and services, or in helping the millions who'd lost homes and jobs through no fault of their own, most citizens were content to leave

banking to its own esoteric practices and suppose the financial community was no less honest and useful than any other branch of business.

A flood of newspaper articles, papers and books, many of them directed at the general reader, have changed that perception, and reform is more widely urged as banking scandals grow more egregious. Deep-rooted troubles seem also present in serious poetry, I'm suggesting, which is treated respectfully by academia and the mainstream press, but seems to rest on very dubious notions. It requires an extensive buttressing of theory, which is often a good deal more entertaining and thought-provoking than the poetry itself, a sort of intellectual packaging that is also, unfortunately, somewhat ramshackle when looked at closely. Theorizing may help critics and poets in their academic careers, but seems not socially productive or even accepted by its originating disciplines. Somewhere, even in these early days, poetry seems to have gone off on its own intriguing but dangerous tracks.

Poet or Critic?

Do we see Eliot as primarily a poet or literary critic? In tone and interests — there is very little of the common touch in the poetry, and still less of the milk of human kindness — I'd have thought the latter.. Eliot is primarily the critic who also wrote poetry, a specialist, self-involved, difficult poetry that often doesn't quite make sense. Unfortunately, as I try to show in the companion article, Eliot's literary criticism also comes with problems, often creating distinctions that are

more clever than real. Poetry doesn't have to be deeply personal or confessional, but does require some sustained and decipherable thought if not to dwindle into a rarefied intellectual game.

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Foundations of Modernism: T. S. Eliot's Literary Criticism

Importance of Eliot's Literary Criticism

Eliot's literary criticism, still read and admired, {1} is an extraordinary testimony to one man's determination to present his views on poetry as the unquestionable facts of the age. Yet the essays of a major thinker on poetry, {2} who admired close textural criticism, have generally not received the kind of attention their author advocated, {3} and academics still quote approvingly what they would not (one hopes) tolerate in their students' essays. T.S. Eliot was an effective advocate of Modernism, even a brilliant one, but there is often more of the debater's skill than reasoned argument. This was obvious to contemporaries, and should be obvious now, but the essays can still be treated as articles of faith, self-evident and beyond assessment, rather than a source of continuing problems in serious poetry. Supporters leap to arms in defending the indefensible, as discussion of Eliot's very modest anti-Semitism illustrates. {4} Here I look at three key articles, suggesting firstly that Eliot's arguments merit detailed examination and, secondly, that misunderstandings arise through Eliot's expositions, which are rather muddled. Put less charitably, the accusation is that obscurities are of Eliot's own making, and paper over what he would have known were weaknesses and over-simplications. None of what follows makes for easy reading, but I hope visitors will persevere because the issues remain important.

Tradition and the Individual Talent

The 1920 *Tradition and the Individual Talent* {5} was the most influential of Eliot's essays and makes two claims. First is that poets belong to a tradition, which supports them and which they modify, allowing past literature to be seen in a modified light. Second is that poetry is not an expression of feelings but an escape from feelings: poets are a catalyst allowing new elements to be combined though they themselves remain unaltered. The last is the most contentious, and not well expressed in the essay, but, perhaps because Eliot remains one of the great founders of Modernism, a protective commentary has grown up to explain what its author really meant.

Hennekam, {6} for example, believes Eliot is arguing that a poem has four components: the poet's knowledge of literary tradition and contemporary literature, his knowledge of structural and genre detail, his own personality, emotions and circumstances, and his creative ability. The *Wikipedia* entry explains that 'What lends greatness to a work of art are not the feelings and emotions themselves, but the nature of the artistic process by which they are synthesized.' {7} *The World Heritage Encyclopedia* notes 'This fidelity to tradition, however, does not require the great poet to forfeit novelty in an act of surrender to repetition. Rather, Eliot has a much more dynamic and progressive conception of the poetic process: Novelty is possible only through tapping into tradition. When a poet engages in the creation of new work, he realizes an aesthetic "ideal order," as it has been

established by the literary tradition that has come before him. As such, the act of artistic creation does not take place in a vacuum. The introduction of a new work alters the cohesion of this existing order, and causes a readjustment of the old to accommodate the new. The inclusion of the new work alters the way in which the past is seen, elements of the past that are noted and realized. In Eliot's own words: "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it." Eliot refers to this organic tradition, this developing canon, as the "mind of Europe." The private mind is subsumed by this more massive one.' {8} *The Poetry Foundation*'s introduction to the essay presents the matter more fairly, adding that 'But Eliot's belief that critical study should be "diverted" from the poet to the poetry shaped the study of poetry for half a century, and while "Tradition and the Individual Talent" has had many detractors, especially those who question Eliot's insistence on canonical works as standards of greatness, it is difficult to overemphasize the essay's influence. It has shaped generations of poets, critics and theorists and is a key text in modern literary criticism. ' {9}

Because the essay is short and available from many sources, readers can readily make up their own minds, but, as I see it, the difficulties rise from three tendencies. First, the key terms are not spelt out sufficiently, and indeed are often used interchangeably. Second, the claims themselves are by no means convincing or novel when seen against the general

views of aesthetics. {10} Third, Eliot's breadth of knowledge is presented as a given, automatically assumed. I will try to tease out these elements from what is a closely written and sometimes baffling document.

The essay opens with an exploration of tradition, where matters are overstated in a combative style: 'You can hardly make the word agreeable to English ears without this comfortable reference to the reassuring science of archaeology. . . criticism is as inevitable as breathing . . .' The argument is quite clear, however: tradition is modified by new works of art. Then we have a tenet of Modernism smuggled in: 'To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art.' The implication here is art requires novelty, and, by extension, Eliot's new type of poetry. What is left out of account is what constitutes art, and the nature and extent of novelty possible.

Rather than give examples — which are not hard to find, incidentally — Eliot then diverts us into a side consideration, drawing the obvious conclusions: what the contemporary artist models himself upon: the indiscriminate whole, adolescent enthusiasms, or a preferred period. Eliot then returns to the main consideration, dismissing the danger that knowledge or pedantry will deaden the poet's art. He ends this first half of the essay with 'What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to

develop this consciousness throughout his career.'

Taken at face value, the argument is not unreasonable but remains rather theoretical, outlining what Eliot and kindred poets were attempting rather than what earlier poets had in fact done. Poets are only one influence, incidentally, as literary critics can have important insights (e.g. I. A. Richards and F.R. Leavis) without being practitioners of the art they study.

Now we come to the most difficult section, which Eliot introduces with 'The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality' by which he did not mean any radical theory view that texts write themselves. His focus was 'personality' and that word immediately raises difficulties because personality is generally seen as inherent quality persisting in an individual, and not therefore something that should or could be extinguished. Nonetheless, Eliot continues with the important statement: 'the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of "personality," not being necessarily more interesting, or having "more to say," but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations'

That ability to catalyze combinations Eliot illustrates with platinum's ability to create sulfur trioxide from oxygen and sulfur dioxide. The mind', he says, 'of the mature poet

differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of "personality," not being necessarily more interesting, or having "more to say," but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.' The catalysis involves elements of two kinds: ' the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyst, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings.'

But what are these two kinds? Does emotion refer to the reader's response and feeling to the poet's originating sensation, which is probably the more everyday distinction? Possibly, because Eliot goes on to say: 'The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art. It may be formed out of one emotion, or may be a combination of several; and various feelings, inhering for the writer in particular words or phrases or images, may be added to compose the final result.' But then probably not because Eliot adds: 'Or great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatever: composed out of feelings solely.' Poetry that evoked no emotion from the reader would be artistically dead, and we must suppose that emotions and feelings both belong to the poet. But perhaps emotion refers to the overall tone of a poem, and feelings to the individual characters portrayed, the protagonists of a play or the implied author of a lyric? But again probably not. Referring to Canto XV of the *Divine Comedy*, Eliot observes: 'The last quatrain gives an image, a feeling attaching to an

image, which "came," which did not develop simply out of what precedes, but which was probably in suspension in the poet's mind until the proper combination arrived for it to add itself to. The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.' Eliot then gives a few examples from literature, ending with Keats' nightingale ode.

We are still in the dark over distinctions between personality, emotion and feelings, however, and remain so in the next paragraph where Eliot quotes a Middleton passage. This balance of light and dark emotions, attraction to beauty and repulsion from ugliness is the 'the structural emotion, provided by the drama.' To this extension of emotion is added: 'It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. . . The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him.' (Perhaps these are emotions *evoked*, but Eliot doesn't say.)

Notwithstanding Eliot's earlier insistence on there being two kinds of things under discussion, we have to suppose that feelings, emotions and personality are all interchangeable

entities, though there is now the possibility that new emotions are created solely by the work of art.

Eliot then attacks the Romantic definition of poetry: 'Consequently, we must believe that "emotion recollected in tranquility" is an inexact formula.' Recollections and tranquility are then explored a little and we come to the end of the second section of the essay with the famous: 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. Naturally, poets still have feelings, possibly stronger than others: 'But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.'

The third section is worth quoting in near totality because it summarizes the argument and adds a third term: significant emotion. 'To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad. There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is an expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but

the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.'

Is this convincing when Eliot erects an absolute barrier between what the poem expresses and what the poet is feeling? 'In the Agamemnon, the artistic emotion approximates to the emotion of an actual spectator; in Othello to the emotion of the protagonist himself. But the difference between art and the event is always absolute;' The crux of the matter is this: if the poet is not *expressing* emotions /feelings /personality in writing his poem, or is simply denying them, then it is equally impossible for him to *escape* from feelings etc. through writing poetry. Poetry becomes simply a diversion, a prestigious one no doubt, but no more salutary than taking up gardening or joining a bridge-playing circle. The argument, as Eliot phrases it, falls to the ground.

Repeating matters to be clear, Eliot's argument is this: The poet's task is to engender emotions specific to the poem he is writing. Those emotions are created by combining disparate elements — events, thoughts, strands of previous traditions, etc. in a particularly sensitive and thoughtful way, an undertaking that requires personal gifts, intelligence and wide reading. That is not a controversial view. But Eliot goes further by entirely separating what the poet feels from the feeling the particular poem evokes, the poet's personal feelings from the emotions specific to the poem. The two are not the same. Writing a poem is an impersonal business. But

the trouble then is that if the poet is *not* expressing his feelings, and *cannot* be, then the writing of the poem has *no connection whatever* with personal feelings, and therefore can't in any way be an *escape* from feelings. Or anything involving personal feelings, not even an *evasion* or *denial* of feelings. The two inhabit separate universes, and each is immaterial to the other.

For this misfortune, Eliot has only himself to blame, the over-cleverness of his attacking and tangled way of writing, which he had every opportunity to rectify when the essays were republished in book form. But there is a further problem. Poet often *do* put of lot of themselves into their work, and are commonly seen working a limited number of themes repeatedly, from youth to maturity. We may not want to designate the themes as feelings, emotions or personalities, or suppose they exist independent of their literary work, but an emotional coloring is nonetheless present. The themes come from deep inside the psyche, individual and/or communal, and one can't imagine Eliot writing something like *Fern Hill,* for example. Eliot can therefore be as impersonal and tight-lipped as he wishes, surely so, but should not be basing theories of poetry on what are only personal preferences.

If, however — which is why I have repeatedly searched for distinctions between Eliot's terms — emotion were the reader's response, feelings the originating emotion and personality an inherent part of a poet's character, then this

impasse could be avoided. In *Bredon Hill*, for example, we could note the sorrow evoked in the reader as emotion, Housman's feelings as transferred, since he was not heterosexual, and pessimism as Housman's inherent personality.

In fact there are better ways of dealing with Eliot's thesis, but I will delay discussion until we get to the third essay discussed here: *Hamlet and his Problems.*

Reflections on Vers Libre

Similar difficulties appear in the 1917 essay *Reflections on Vers Libre*, {12} where Eliot is arguing for prosodic freedom. Once again, Eliot is proselytizing for his brand of poetry, and the examples — 'Both of them I quote because of their beauty' — are by T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound. The first starts with hyperbaton and a trivializing excess of alliteration: 'Once in a finesse of fiddles found I ecstasy'. The second ends with the problematic line 'A broken bundle of mirrors . . ', where the poet who remarked that the writer must have its wits about him at all times seems not to have realized that medieval ladies were not beset by *bundles* of mirrors, broken or otherwise. In fact, the fragile glass and silver-backed mirror appears only in Renaissance Florence. Small points. But what is important is the whole tenor of the argument, which inserts one half-truth into another. 'What sort of a line that would not scan at all I cannot say' remarks Eliot, knowing perfectly well that scansion, how we represent the pattern of stress, half-stress and no stress (I am simplifying) is not equivalent to a line 'scanning', where we

expect some regularity of pattern. That 'some' can be very general, of course, something only vaguely sensed behind the written line, as Eliot himself notes: 'the ghost of some simple meter should lurk behind the arras in even the "freest" verse'.

But why be so categorical? (In fact, as later poets were to demonstrate, it is also possible to write lines in prose, which do not scan in any generally accepted way.) Then we have one of those glancing blows that Eliot was so fond of delivering, here directed at Swinburne: ''Swinburne mastered his technique, which is a great deal, but he did not master it to the extent of being able to take liberties with it, which is everything.' Is it? And no liberties in 'Seals, whales, storks, elephants, bears, monkeys, geese, / And more, can all be made by young and old. / Menageries on your own mantelpiece!' (*Menageries* {12}). Again, the example is unimportant, except to emphasize the unwisdom of giving hostages to fortune in these unneeded sallies.

Then we pass to the early seventeenth century, to John Webster, 'who was in some ways a more cunning technician than Shakespeare.' In The White Devil, Webster forgoes regularity in the moments of highest intensity, the irregularity being further enhanced by the use of short lines and the breaking up of lines in dialogue.' Perhaps so, though whether Webster is the more cunning technician than Shakespeare is debatable. Shakespeare can also take great liberties with key lines, and his verse becomes more

'intuitive' in the later plays. {13} But license is not a law of nature. Pope maintains a variety in regularity, and some great poets, Racine and Pushkin, for example, write remarkably regular lines throughout. Nor are the examples Eliot that provides those of intense emotion. The argument so far is not over-convincing, I'd suggest, and is certainly not helped by the erudition, or seeming erudition, which only complicates matters.

A comparison of Edgar Lee Masters (*Spoon River Anthology*) with George Crabbe follows, which finds Crabbe's verse is 'the more intense of the two; he is keen, direct and unsparing. . . Mr. Masters requires a more rigid verse form. . .' Indeed he does. Much seems to be prose, or close to it, which is hazardous to Eliot's case that all poetry can be scanned:

Have you seen walking through the village
A man with downcast eyes and haggard face?
That is my husband who, by secret cruelty
Never to be told, robbed me of my youth and my beauty;
{14}

Next appears the gnomic 'So much for meter. There is no escape from meter; there is only mastery.' But since meter is a systematic regularity in rhythm, which the Masters example does not display, it is difficult to know what Eliot is arguing. That the verse of the then popular *Spoon River Anthology* lacks mastery? Possibly, but then it would help to

say so. And to find some other poet than Crabbe with which to compare Masters since centuries of sensibility separate the two.

Passing on, we come to two sections of verse, one by H.D. and the other by Thomas Arnold, where to me, a century after Eliot's claiming 'What neither Blake nor Arnold could do alone is being done in our time', Arnold's seems the more 'modern'. Again, this is unfortunate: Eliot is summoning as evidence what seems to undermine his argument that there is no vers libre as such, only a better understanding of verse generally, which his and contemporary poetry exemplified.

The last two paragraphs deal with rhymeless verse, arguing that the removal of rhyme throws other verse devices into higher relief. Few would object to the thesis but, unfortunately, once again, we have the Eliot love of paradox. 'Rhyme removed, ' he declares, 'the poet is at once held up to the standards of prose.' Prose, with its strong emphasis on making discursive sense? Eliot continues, 'Rhyme removed, much ethereal music leaps up from the word, which has hitherto chirped unnoticed in the expanse of prose.' Leaps up? Chirps? Perhaps this is humor, or the master is playing with his readers. But probably not: the essay ends soberly with 'we conclude that the division between Conservative Verse and vers libre does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos.'

By now the conscientious reader should be feeling uneasy.

Important distinctions have been thrown away, and only Eliot and his like-minded poets are to deliberate on aesthetics, which, on the examples given, and in the absence of clear rules, or any rules at all, seems a very dubious proposition.

Hamlet and his Problems

With *Hamlet and his Problems* {15} (collected in *The Sacred Wood*, 1921) Eliot is even more dismissive of earlier critics, including Goethe, Coleridge and Pater, but allows contemporaries the credit of moving in the right direction. *Hamlet* is not solely Shakespeare's creation, but a reworking of material from Kyd and others. Being cobbled together in this fashion, the play is also an artistic failure. It has unnecessary scenes. The verse style is inconsistent. Hamlet's feelings towards his guilty mother make an impossible theme for drama. Because these repressed feelings can't be dragged into the light, moreover, the only avenue left open is the 'objective correlative', defined as: 'in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked'. Other plays, like *Macbeth,* are more successful in this regard. 'The artistic "inevitability" lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in Hamlet.' Hamlet has to escape into madness, a ruse on Shakespeare's part that leaves the unmentionable matter untreated.

More than this, Eliot does not say, which has allowed later writers to expand the term into a general symbolic device. {16-19} Contemporaries were less convinced, however, as my page on Ezra Pound indicates {20} and it seems unwise to make speculations as to what Shakespeare could and could not do into support for the concept of objective correlate. Not all critics see Hamlet as an artistic failure, moreover.

But we don't need to blunder into these theoretical tangles. One way of dealing with emotional expression is to understand how poets work. Writing is commonly a two-way process, where the poet is continually switching between creator and audience, from 'does this really express how I felt or could now feel?' to 'will this work for the reader?' A poem is a dialogue between what the poet has so far written, and what the piece suggests could be its eventual achievement. Art is not simply skill in expressing emotion, therefore, but also a skill in *evoking* the appropriate emotion in the reader. Into that appropriate emotion come many other matters as well: traditions, readers' expectations, genres, rhetorical devices, imagery and metaphor, scansion, aesthetic detachment and shaping, etc. The successful poem is a fusion of these elements, where the whole is self-referencing and therefore larger than the sum of its ingredients. {10}

Eliot the Man

Eliot surely knew this. His training was in philosophy, moreover, which will have covered some aspects of

aesthetics. Why set off such wild goose chases after meaning unless it was not clear exposition Eliot was after, but status, for himself and the poetry he espoused? He was extraordinarily productive under very difficult circumstances — money troubles, failing marriage, long hours as a bank official — and the hundred odd essays published between 1916 and 1923 {21} point not only to someone unusually ambitious but possibly also tormented and self-driven. There are many successful poems in *Prufrock,* but their ambiance is distinctly strange, forbidding even. In short, was not Eliot a deeply troubled man, to which later events only testify: *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men,* religious conversion, personal papers kept out of circulation by his second wife?

Why, moreover, did contemporary poets and the reading public submit to this air of invincible authority? Were they cowed by the erudition? Did they seek publication in the avant garde world over which Eliot presided? Or did they simply not want to give up the time to matters that seemed tangential to poetry?

Eliot's criticism was therefore both salutary and unfortunate. He made criticism the subject of serious study and more than genial rambles in personal taste. But he also made the subject unnecessarily difficult and partisan. To personal preferences were added personal neuroses, though Eliot was not alone in the despair widespread after the horrific slaughter of WWI. *Scrutiny* and other journals provided The New Criticism with useful technical audits of literature,

valuable to writers as to general readers, but the theoretical aspects once more gained the upper hand in the critical theory that followed WWII. Matters had once been fairly straightforward. Prose aimed for discursive clarity, and poetry for the infinite shades of meaning, emotive force, tone and implication that are possible, perhaps unavoidable, in language used in its wider remit. Now the positioning was reversed, and critical evaluation became far more astute and interesting than the poetry it purported to explain, for all that both, unfortunately, could be wondrously wrong-headed. Much of today's radical literary theory {22} seems to have begun with Eliot's over-clever essays.

With hindsight, looking back the forty years since I first read these essays, I even more suspect the obfuscation was deliberate. Tradition is rightly stressed by Eliot, but the larger point — to what extent, why and how previous poetry can be incorporated into contemporary poetry — is not asked. Because his own work evaded the need for old words to be given new settings? *The Wasteland* does not recreate language — i.e. rehabilitate, re-envison and deepen the usage of words expected of poetry — so much as employ collages of quotation and everyday prose. That prose orientation has become mainstream — in the subject matter of poetry, its techniques and preoccupations. Topics of elevated and universal interest have been relegated to amateur verse, and serious poetry now deals with the quotidian of life. Metered verse became free verse, and is often now prose in all but name. The philosophy of language

and meaning, subjects taxing even in thoughtful prose, have become woven into the fabric of modern poetry, often without a proper grasp of the principles. I doubt if Eliot intended this. The essays had a proselytizing role, but it seems hard to escape the conclusion that the gaps, opacities and suppressions in Eliot's own argumentative style set modern poetry on an unfortunate course.

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Wallace Stevens: A Critical Review

Even the New York Times seemed nonplussed. Wallace Stevens, Noted Poet, Dead, the obituary began. {1} Yes, noted by connoisseurs of Modernist poetry, but never a well-known figure, nor one assiduous of reputation. The thoughts and imagery were foreign, the tone detached, and the arguments hard to follow. Moreover, for all their gaudy celebration of the senses, the poems fought shy of actually saying anything intelligible, just as Wallace Stevens himself was cautious of bohemian impropriety. He was a respected officer of a large insurance company who happened to write poetry — very accomplished poetry, but poetry largely devoid of passion, biography or social commitment.
Wallace Stevens was born in 1879 in comfortable circumstances, became president of the Harvard literary magazine, tried his hand at journalism for nine months in New York, but then opted for the safety of a dull aspect of the legal profession. He married his long-suffering sweetheart in 1909, delayed having a child for years, and finally left New York in 1919 with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, where he reached the position of vice-president in 1934. But for odd trips to collect the honors that accumulated in the last years, Stevens stayed in Hartford for the remainder of his life as a safe company man. {2}

Modernist Credentials

Stevens was in his late twenties when he started writing Modernist poetry, and forty-four when his first book,

Harmonium (1923), was published. Thereafter, the volumes appeared with increasing if not pressing frequency: *A Primitive Like an Orb* (1948), *Transport to Summer* (1949), *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), *The Collected Poems* (1950) and *Opus Posthumous* (1957). The subjects developed variously, but the themes did not fundamentally change. *Harmonium* is the most original collection, and contains many of his most anthologized poems — *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, *Sunday Morning*, *Peter Quince at the Clavier, Anecdote of the Jar, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. *Sunday Morning* was an impressively sustained hedonistic reverie, but the others — were they anything but elaborate entertainments in poetic skill? The New York Times critic couldn't believe so: 'From one end of the book to the other there is not an idea that can vitally affect the mind, there is not one word that can arouse emotions. The volume is a glittering edifice of icicles. Brilliant as the moon, the book is equally dead.'

But Stevens was not writing in the old tradition. As the critic had shrewdly realized, Stevens was creating something exotic: a poésie pure, a Symbolist poetry without the usual symbols, a poetry indeed where rhythms, vowels and consonants substituted for musical notes. And that, for the good Percy Hutchinson, was simply not enough. 'Poetry,' he wrote is not founded in ideas; to be effective and lasting, poetry must be based on life, it must touch and vitalize emotion.'

But Stevens' poems were purposely cerebral, and did affect the mind, at least his own mind, and he went on developing his themes of perceptual ambivalence at great length. {3} True, some of the more enigmatic lines: 'The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world, to feel that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair.' would have exasperated the moral philosopher. (How are desire and despair being used in this instance, and what is the situation they are describing?) Stevens provides information on neither, which raises specters of intellectual frivolity, of playing fast and loose with concepts linked only by alliteration. Perhaps Stevens did see things more intensely than most. Perhaps his reality was crucially that of the imagination. Perhaps the Symbolism he espoused was too rarefied an import for isolationist America, and one that needed café society to thrive. Whatever. Stevens made few converts but kept to his lonely furrow.

Recognition came belatedly. To the narrower strains of New Criticism his work was living proof that poetry is composed of words used in new and subtle relationships. Postmodernists in their turn found his work a paradigm of true poetry, of artwork largely sealed from reference to the outside world. Academia found him useful teaching material: students most certainly had to work hard at his poetry: the content was rarefied, the diction unexpected, and the word-play obscure indeed.

Initial Reception

The general public was less enthusiastic. Some poems were seen as fresh and playful as Edith Sitwell's.

Chieftan Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!
(*Bantans in Pine Woods* {4-5})

Others could be tiresomely clever:

The prince of proverbs of pure poetry,
(*Esthètique du Mal* {6})

And much was simply baffling. What, exactly, did this mean:

Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.
(*The Emperor of Ice-Cream* {7-8})

Or:

We make, although inside an egg
Variations on the words spread sail.
(*Things of August* {9})

Was Stevens truly a Symbolist? Certainly he wrote in an allusive, enigmatic, and musical style. He developed the art of suggestion, and employed rare words, private associations and syntactical intricacies. But Symbolism attempted to extend the evocative power of words to

express feeling, sensations and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness. Scattered jottings suggest that Stevens did indeed identify with these aims, and he certainly read Bergson, Santayana and contemporary art magazines. But his later work in fact attempts a more public role, which is rather what Symbolism was designed *not* to do. Of the great mass of people he wrote 'The men have no shadows / And the women have only one side.' The note is elegiac, but perhaps a little patronizing in:

...that the ignorant man, alone,
Has any chance to mate with life
That is sensual, pearly spouse, the life
That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze
(*The Sense Of The Sleight-Of-Hand Man* {10})

Elucidation

Many of the poems, which were initially seen as engaging puzzles, perhaps representing various strains of philosophic thought, have now been elucidated, as far as seems possible with poems avoiding closure. Among the more famous, with excerpts, are:

Anecdote of the Jar {11-12}

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

Various interpretations have been put forward: that the jar represents human order imposed on the slovenly wilderness, that the jar is a female symbol of maternal care for the natural environment, that the jar is a portal to the underworld of the mythic past, and/or the very act of focusing on something changes our perception of its surroundings.

Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock {13-14}

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.

In this playful piece, Stevens is possibly contrasting the conventional nature of people's suburban lives with the riches of imagination, especially the dreams of those who, like sailors, who have seen faraway places and violent weather.

The Emperor of Ice Cream {15-16}

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress

As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

The poem resisted explication for decades, but critics now see it as the preparation for a wake. In the first stanza, with its Freudian imagery, the neighbors are making ice cream and decorating the place with flowers. In the second stanza we see reality, the old woman laid out for death in the plainest of circumstances. Artifice and illusion give way to reality: a favorite theme of Stevens', who thought poetry 'must resist the intelligence'.

The Idea of Order at Key West {17-18}

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The poem, in outline, narrates the effect of a woman singing by the sea, which causes us to see the world differently. Beyond that lie various interpretations: that the poem is deliberately ambiguous, with irresolvable difficulties, that it affirms the poetic spirit without being able to locate it, that

the idea of order brings the specter of disorder, and/or that a 'blessed rage for order' lies at the heart of all creative work.

The Snow Man{19-20}

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

The poem is another of Stevens' teasing dichotomies, that we must be cool and objective like the winter but not project human feelings of coolness and sadness onto the weather.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird {21-22}

One

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

Each of the haiku-like stanzas asks us to look with more detachment and curiosity at the world, with multiple perspectives, how we group ourselves and what we see, how we hear sound and silence, how we respond to the beautiful and the mundane, how we treat matters as literal or symbolic. In stanza seven we are asked if we prefer the unobtainable (golden birds) to real life of his fellow

Connecticut men, and in stanza eight the blackbird is in some way involved in that knowledge. When, in stanza nine, the blackbird flies away, its disappearance marks one limit of what we can know. The next stanza is more difficult but perhaps castigates those who would accept a cheap, unthinking notion of beauty. Stanza eleven is more oblique still, but perhaps suggests that we are protected by convention (glass of a railway carriage) from seeing the threats the real world possesses. The last two stanzas are open to several interpretations involving time, the seasons and multiple story endings — the details of which readers will have to check for themselves. {22} So many interpretations have indeed been hung on these perplexing lines that explication is in danger of becoming a gallery of mirrors, endlessly reflecting more rarefied notions, all too familiar to someone like Stevens with an interest in oriental art, but defying fully rational explanation.

Sunday Morning

But it was with *Sunday Morning* that Wallace Stevens' made an indelible impression on American poetry. {23-24} The poem has a Keatsian-like dwelling on sensation — though not the sustained hush of a too-obvious craftsmanship — but is interesting for another reason. Keats was certainly aware that brevity gives relish to life, but he would not have said Death is the mother of beauty. Keats was a Romantic, a child of his time, and those times embraced political change. He was not the sickly idealist sometimes envisaged, but a practical man brought up against the realities of life by his

medical training. Dreams and imagination may have been the raw materials of art, but Keats gives them the warmth and individuality that Stevens does not usually attempt.

Stanza V

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."
Death is the mother of beauty, hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our path,
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
Whispered a little out of tenderness,
She makes the willows shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

Sunday Morning concerns itself with the impermanence of sensuous happiness, and somewhat contrasts the Christian with Greek views of life. The first sees our life on the earth as a preparation for the next. The second regards present existence as the all-important, and one that should be lived to the full.

But what is meant by 'Death is the mother of beauty'? Sensuous matter has beauty because it or we have no extended existence: we prize it more because it is so fleeting? That beauty is conferred on objects by considerations that lie beyond the veil of Death, i.e. Platonic Ideas? Or death removes the aged and infirm, giving space to the new-born and beautiful? All three can be read into the poem, but may only make sense when we realize that S*unday Morning* is modelled on George Santayana's philosophy, {25} notably his Interpretations of *Poetry and Religion* (1900) {26} Even the stanzas broadly follow the chapters in Santayana's book: stanza I relates to chapter 1, II to 2, III to 3, IV to 4, V to 5, VI to 6, VII to 7 and 8, and VIII to chapters 9 and 10. In stanza V, the speaker is looking beyond the permanent but cold Platonic Idea to reunion after death — or possibly so, as the stanza returns to the attractions of the present.

I have only touched on Sidney Fleshback's {27} article, which draws together themes of death in other poems by Stevens, notes the attitudes of Whitman, Browning, and Emerson in the poem, and discusses the conflicting images and their possibly satiric intent. But one point is worth stressing. From a traditional viewpoint, Wallace Stevens wrote his most beautiful poem when he stopped chasing his own evanescent musings and reworked the established themes of European civilization. Sidney Fleshback calls Stevens' handling of the themes idiosyncratic, which they must be when Stevens is following his own objectives. While

we stay on the surface of the poem we can admire its treatment of the numinous quality of sensuous life, its underlying mysteries and unfathomable nature. Look deeper, and we begin to wonder whether the poet was not simply toying with concepts and intellectual possibilities: excellent material for academic studies but baffling to the common reader. Symbols — the hermetic with Mallarmé, jeweled with Darío, portentous with Rilke and obscure in much of Stevens's work — do not succeed unless they call on the great commonplaces of life. {28-30} Poetry may or may not create ideas, but it must give them contemporary identity, a local habitation and a name.

Contribution of Wallace Stevens to Modernism

Stevens developed slowly and was still capable of writing what Perkins {31} calls 'hopelessly conventional poems' and 'genteel sonnets' in 1908. He submitted to small magazines, took an interest in serious writing and French painting, but his 1923 collection *Harmonium*, brought out when he was 44, attracted little interest: the book of 1500 copies was soon remaindered. Yet many of the poems in these 125 pages were later called flawless and are now famous {31}. It was a comic world of artificial simplicity, affectation and parody, but behind the showmanship there was also coldness and acute disappointment. Sophisticated detachment was the tone, neither sentimental nor the tough-minded realist. In the expanded volume that came out in 1931, as in the *Ideas of Order* that followed in 1935, the brio and gaudiness faded into the reflections of middle age, and there appeared concerns with the responsibilities of

the creative spirit. Thereafter the poems become colder, though the last ten years saw another creative burst: a half of his poems were written in this period: ambitious pieces, a little prosy perhaps, but still strikingly original, placing Stevens among the 'four or five greatest American poets'. {31}

He had few intellectual acquaintances, but his well-paid steady job and comfortable home gave him time to question the role of the imagination in perception, how we order our sensations, indeed what actually made reality for us. But what lay beyond the world as we imagined it? And how should we live with these illusions stripped away. Having lost the faith of youth, Stevens was driven to accept than man lives by myths, knowing that they were myths, but necessary myths: 'supreme fictions', that words alone create reality — a view that made him popular with Postmodernist poets. His poems record or extend the process of creating reality because they resist instant comprehension, as Stevens said (his) poetry must. Poets do not simply express, whether beautifully or memorably, the zeitgeist of the age, but create a more questioning and more troubling reality.

Stevens was not a philosopher or profound thinker. He read Emerson, Santayana, Nietzsche, Bergson and others of the period, but his own essays in *The Necessary Angel* are somewhat vague and muddled. {31} Poets, he thought, have stronger and more active imaginations. But where the great Romantics had found and embodied reality, the

current situation was much less certain. Perhaps all that poets could do now was enjoy the imagination for itself, be happy in its functioning.

The thought or hope seems to have given him a new confidence. The poems of the last phase abandon a simple Imagist approach, though the thinking is often still through images. They bring in cold abstractions and make no pretense to compose 'by the musical phrase': many are written in that most conservative of styles, the pentameter. Of first importance is the play of intellect, which is sometimes questioning whether we are alive at all. {31}

Assessment

Some meaning could usually be found or surmised in a Stevens poem, but it could also be open to varied and sometimes conflicting interpretations. No doubt that was intentional, seeking not to close off creative possibilities. But that intention, praised as philosophy in mainstream poetry sites, {2} is not philosophy as commonly understood, which aims at generality, consistency and objectivity, drawing arguments ever tighter to avoid refutation. Stevens never submitted to a formal study of philosophy, and he distrusted the intellect, making up arguments in his poems as he went along, which were therefore ad hoc, on the hoof and local, so to speak. Lacking proper study, he did not see contemporary thinkers in any perspective, nor did he reproduce their thoughts in a scholarly awareness of alternatives. There was something of the mental dilettante in Stevens, the eternal student who felt the free spirit of

poetry should be larger than the plodding tedium of course work. He was a practiced lawyer, moreover, employed to do the best for his client, which in this case was himself, the unfettered, great magician of words. Courts decide on the winning argument, not justice necessarily, and Stevens would have been acting unprofessionally to countenance for a moment the opposing counsel's view that language serves for social cohesion, that its conservative nature keeps words functioning for a common good.

Astute and sympathetic literary criticism {32-33} has shown how much care and intelligence has gone in Stevens' poems, where words are chosen on many levels — intellectual, associative, poetry craft — but many poems remain only partially successful. Certainly they were not properly understood in Stevens' lifetime, and what is not understood cannot command an emotional response, i.e. cannot be fully poetry. How then did Stevens gain his reputation?

By his stylistic gifts and his seriousness of purpose. Whatever they said, or didn't say, the poems were remarkably original, fluent and self-assured. There was nothing quite like them on the poetry scene, and Stevens was equally at home in traditional, free verse and prose-like styles. *Sunday Morning* seemed a throwback to the great Romantics, with a diction to match, but the six months taken to craft the piece had been time well spent. Many of the passages are deservedly famous:

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;

There are too many to list, but many remember:

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

The earlier poems could be affected and whimsical, that was true, but they were never artless. An altogether different view of poetry was being attempted. Where poets had previously been expected to write self-sufficient lines — beautiful, emotionally-charged and illuminating — the emphasis now was on the unexpected, sometimes outlandish or sense-challenging phrases, which called for sustained mental effort. The reader was not spoon-fed the obvious shaped into expected forms, but had to follow, armed with acute intelligence of varied possibilities, the half-glimpsed connections and correlations offered by the poem. Intellectual conundrums, evocative phrases and unusual angles questioned our settled opinions about life, as indeed they should. There was no prize at the end, moreover, no sudden blaze of comprehension, but only a more sober understanding of the assumptions built into language use.

Stevens was a heavily-built, prudent and taciturn man.

Poetry was something apart from his daytime job and the family, something he pursued intently and creatively as a legal brief. But in this he was very much the lawyer, who could adopt any pose, any court-room trick to make his client's case. Outrageous statements, affected diction, obscure forebodings: everything was material to the case. Stevens was not a crusader, nor an ideologue, but in standing a little apart from his poems he nonetheless had that deep commitment to narrow beliefs that characterizes the other founders of Modernism. {36}

A vast critical industry has grown up around the poet, and many of the books and articles make absorbing reading, sometimes more engaging than the work itself. Where poems do become explicable, however, there often remain troubling conundrums and lacunae, lines and phrases where possible explanations are not wholly convincing. Poems do not suddenly shift into focus, as they do, for example on realizing that 'I was neither at the hot gates' in Eliot's *Gerontion* refers to Thermopylae. What is exposed is a complicated structure of associations, special readings, extended analogies and word play that remains peripheral to the world of common use, unassimilated to the ordinary in the way a novice learning a foreign language holds in his mind the unfamiliar words he has just looked up in the dictionary. That is not our usual experience with poetry. There may be obscurities, depths below depths, and passages not fully capable of being rendered into prose, but there is nonetheless an exterior reference of sorts, which is

part a local context and part an overall tradition.

Jackie Deskovich's essay *Not at the Centre of a Diamond: How the Paradoxical Relationship Between Reality and Imagination Works in Wallace Stevens '"Esthetique du Mal"* {35} is an extended enquiry into Stevens' use of paradoxes in a poem that explores the relationship between imagination and reality. The opening quote from Stevens' poem starts enticingly enough:

He was at Naples writing letters home

But then descends more to prose:

And, between letters, reading paragraphs
On the sublime. Vesuvius had groaned
For a month.

Then the writing picks up a bit, though how the lightning cast 'corners' isn't explained, though perhaps the eruptions are reflected curiously through the window glass:

It was pleasant to be sitting there
While the sultriest fulgurations, flickering,
Cast corners in the glass.

To be followed with what Deskovich describes as 'one of the paradoxical divides only minimally addressed in the poem: the divide between past and "ancient" ':

He could describe
The terror of the sound because the sound
Was ancient.

At this point, the careful reader may be noting that the sound isn't ancient, the historical record is. More licenses follow:

He tried to remember the phrases: pain
Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,
Pain killing pain on the very point of pain.

We can't describe the 'terror of the sound', only report on the terror the sound brought to inhabitants in the eruption of 62 AD. 'Pain' has been smuggled in, and 'pain killing pain' is a very oblique way of describing extinction. Nor can we can we properly use 'tremble' to describe the volcano, not when it carries the heavy overtone of fear: the sentient animal may feel fear but the volcano does not, even in another dimension.

The volcano trembled in another ether,
As the body trembles at the end of life. (i 1-12)

But let's press on. 'Pained' is paired with 'visceral verbs such as "torture" and "kill" (i 11,9,10), and the 'last two lines of the stanza tie the body and that terrifying volcano together, equating their trembling, in order to embody terror and give

it meaning.' But this is otiose: 'embody' is mixing up the historical record and present day threats, and the threatening eruption already has meaning. All the narrator has to say is: 'He remembered the destruction of Pompeii', etc. But Stevens' concern is more with pain itself. The poem continues:

It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human.
There were roses in the cool café. His book
Made sure of the most correct catastrophe.
Except for us, Vesuvius might consume
In solid fire the utmost earth and know
No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up
To die). This is a part of the sublime
From which we shrink. And yet, except for us,
The total past felt nothing when destroyed (i 13-21)

A lot seems overwritten here: Volcanic eruptions are destructive of the immediate surroundings but don't consume 'the utmost earth'. 'Sublime' is being misused: it doesn't mean partaking of the imagination but : '1. lofty, grand, or exalted in thought, expression, or manner, 2. of outstanding spiritual, intellectual, or moral worth, and/or 3. tending to inspire awe usually because of elevated quality (as of beauty, nobility, or grandeur) or transcendent excellence. And, being so, we clearly don't 'shrink' from it. 'And yet, except for us, / The total past felt nothing when destroyed' is being unnecessarily clever. Poets are expected to use words with unusual proprietary, not muddle up

elementary distinctions from which to draw dubious conclusions. But Deskovich continues: 'Just as we know that food is a necessary part of living, we must recognize that pain is as well. It also prompts us to recognize that this specific mundane life contains pain; it is not only the pain that is related to recalling epic events such as Vesuvius' eruption, it is also the pain that this hungry poet feels.' Historical pain is again being explored in this stanza, but 'this time it is more explicitly made part of the sublime.' How? '"Except for us" is repeated in lines 16 and 20, and both instances are used to contrast us with those who feel no pain, Vesuvius itself and the whole of the past, leading to the conclusion that it *must* be us who feel the pain. Though we may shy away from pain, it is part of the sublime according to line 19.'

Let's leave these attempts to subvert everyday distinctions, and turn to language, which the following paragraph addresses. In summary, the argument is: 1. Certainty is gained through language, 2a. 'ignoring the cocks that crow us up/ To die)' means that Vesuvius is ignoring the roosters waking people up, which shows how unfeeling nature is to mankind, and therefore how painful existence can be. And/or 2b. the parentheses indicate that since roosters cannot express pain or personality through language (they can only crow), pain is not real to them. 3. Reality and imagination therefore collide. But do they? Cannot roosters simply feel inarticulate pain?

And so on. To save space I have only discussed the first third of the essay here, which goes on to explore further 'paradoxes' of meaning in the poem, often profitably. The poem certainly poses questions, but the purpose of philosophy is not simply to ask questions but to find answers to life's perplexing problems. Language has its limits and difficulties, certainly, but if we use grammar, reference and context inappropriately the muddles that result are not the fault of language or imagination but our own willfulness. Of course the lines are intriguing, and crafted with the exactness of verse, but the meaning is in the singularly tenuous connections made, and the poetry in the intellectual frisson that arises from such possibilities:

The death of Satan was a tragedy
For the imagination. A capital
Negation destroyed him in his tenement
And, with him, many blue phenomena.
It was not the end he had foreseen.

Do we enjoy *The Emperor of Ice Cream* now we 'understand' it better? Not much, I think. 'Concupiscent' remains the wrong word, silly and affected. The Freudian imagery of 'cigars' is unnecessary, crude and unconvincing. 'Emperor' remains bombastic — even crass if making emotional capital out of a woman's funeral. That life goes on, unconcerned with our emotional needs, is a favorite observation of Stevens', but simple statement or illustration won't bring situations to life.

But perhaps the 'muddles' are deliberate, and poetry lies in the unclarity? That is the suggestion of Andrew Osborn, who compares Stevens' poetry to Wittgenstein's shift from meaning as prepositional logic to meaning as social use of words. {37} Wittgenstein shifted from definitions with sharp outlines to overlapping examples of word use, which necessarily have more blurred outlines ('games' being the celebrated example). Stevens was also preoccupied with differences between the 'real' world of sense impressions, and that of the imagination, between words as used and words indicative of an ideal world. Unclarity was inevitable, because, as he remarked, '. . . one cannot always say a thing clearly and retain the poetry of what one is saying.'

It is worth pausing and noting the audacity of that statement. Most poets generate 'homeless' material, i.e. lines and phrases of promise that won't fit into the poem being written. If exceptionally good it may be retained for future use in other poems, but usually it is junked: poetry is very much an art of selecting, clarifying, integrating and simplifying. Stevens' approach is quite different: it is to build the poem with and around such material, accepting unclarity to include 'the poetry of what one is saying'. Many of his pieces, even some of the earlier poems collected in 'Harmonium' adopt that approach. What to traditional poets would seem laziness or dishonesty (Stevens never stooped to explaining himself) becomes a poetry that is in, i.e. *constituted by*, that interplay of meanings, and not what the

lines ostensibly point to. 'It explains why, with his ice, Stevens desired a creamier vocabulary of which to whip concupiscent curds; why, among the blackbird's Zen austerities, he cultivated the hothouse language of equipage and bawds.'

The article provides many clearly-argued examples but perhaps overlooks a crucial distinction. Wittgenstein examined words actually used in everyday life, with meanings that were needed and made sense generally. Stevens used words in ways that occurred to him in writing his poems, i.e. in a local and sometimes private way.

Look, realist, not knowing what you expect.
The green falls on you as you look,
Falls on and makes and gives, even a speech.
And you think that that is what you expect,
That elemental parent, the green night,
Teaching a fusky alphabet. (CP 267)

That 'fusky', meaning to darken or confuse, is exactly the right word, critics have contended, because the night in this poem is sharing its own element of darkness. But are we concerned about such things? Stevens' contends that we should be, not because they're meaningful to our lives, and so carry emotive force, but because this is where his musings have brought us. In other words, we have to accept Stevens as a serious poet, one whose work deserves that indulgence, to make the intellectual effort. It is a strategy

common to the early Modernists, to Yeats and Pound in particular, though clearly a circular argument.

One notable aspect of his poems is their lack of closure, i.e. they do not cohere into a single statement or view. Gary Cronin looks at this feature in the poem *An ordinary evening in New Haven* from the standpoints of the 'real' world as lived by people, the poet's own imaginative response to reality, and his expression of that response as a meditative poem. {39} Stevens continually qualifies his material, interlacing themes and subverting the usual word choice, falling rhythm, aphorism, and temporal unity to prevent closure. The result is an endless elaboration on the relationship between reality and the poet's fictive power to recreate reality. Indeed, as Stevens said in one of his letters, 'I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion. Sometimes I believe in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. Both of these project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that.' So they did in *An ordinary evening in New Haven* where a simple enquiry swells to thirty-one 18-line cantos, impossible to summarize here, or do justice to Cronin's detailed analysis. I will simply wonder if the cleverness that Stevens deploys makes for worthwhile reading. We work, notebook in hand, through a detailed philosophical paper because the author has important points to make: the gain is worth the time and effort. But is that so with Stevens, who has nothing novel to impart, and will only show us that employing words in unusual ways gives

unusual results?

In the metaphysical streets, the profoundest forms
Go with the walker subtly walking there.
These he destroys with wafts of wakening.

Free from their majesty and yet in need
Of majesty, of an invisible clou,
A minimum of making in the mind (Canto XI)

Cronin leads us through an interpretation, that indeed makes sense, but only by taking a series of mental leaps along one, exceptionally narrow path. Other routes, in the way expected of poetry, lead to dead-ends. Or in some ways they do. In fact, by being so ambiguous, the poem can surrender quite different insights. {40} As always, everything depends on what the reader expects poetry to do. I find the cleverness rather tiresome, and gain little aesthetic satisfaction from the lines: overdone alliteration (minimum of making in the mind) and mind-boggling phrases (wafts of waking), words used loosely (metaphysical) or obliquely (Free from their majesty). Stevens aficionados will see matters differently.

But so arises the critical interest in Stevens. Explication is needed: the poetry is intentionally 'difficult'. When, moreover, Wallace Stevens was judged an essential poet by Bloom, Vendler and other leading critics, his poetry became a legitimate area of academic study, and one benefiting from

the striking new approaches of critical theory. Stevens appeared on the degree syllabus. Students had to use the approaches listed above to write their essays and term papers, whether or not they agreed with them, or even fully understood the explications. Academics also had to build on what was published, commenting on other interpretations, employing contemporary theory, wide reading and critical acumen to say ever more interesting things about the poems: that is the nature of research in the humanities. But is this not a dangerous argument for cleverness, often at the expense of other elements of poetry (emotion, aesthetic shaping, bearing witness, social comment)? No, not to contemporary literary criticism. Moreover, since Stevens was a great poet, all his creations have an element of greatness, and could be accepted as such. Criticism didn't then have to trouble itself with the aesthetic quality of individual lines or phrases. Nor apply the practical, working knowledge that poets acquire, which allows them to spot what's wrong and put it right. Traditional poetry sensibilities were no longer needed in academia, any more than lecturers in the history of art need possess painting skills of their own. They were separate areas of expertise, as indeed were the dazzling displays of ingenuity and erudition in the leading theorists of the 1980s and 1990s, where the poems became increasingly a means to an end. To make crass remarks of the emperor's new clothes variety on Stevens was not only to risk career derailment, therefore, but to display a sad provincialism. The common reader might remain skeptical, but exciting new poetries had moved into academia.

Postscript

Stevens' influence came largely after his death, but it was an important influence that fundamentally changed how poetry came to be written. Poems themselves were the last courts of appeal, answering to no one for their style and content. Poetry did not have to say anything fully intelligible, or anything that served for overall meaning or outline. Poems avoided closure and grew out of the writing process. Indeed they *were* the writing process itself as intriguing notions were put on paper and elaborated by a host of techniques, some belonging to the realm of poetry, some advocated by critical theory. Nor need the notions be serious, or even address the human condition. Vast new realms were opened up, and what had previously been the conscientious crafting of new material on traditional themes now became a demanding intellectual enterprise. Centuries of aesthetics were set aside, and any text could become poetry if it employed and astutely developed the inherent subterfuges and ambiguities of words.

But the main beneficiary was academia: literary criticism, and the poetry written in and for the university circuit. Poetry had once been a rare ability in expressing important matters exactly. After Stevens, it became an intriguing exercise in self-awareness, a fireworks display of the writing process. But when gifts and practiced skills no longer counted, what was to stop the world being flooded with such creations, intelligible only to their authors? Academic credentials. There had to be a way of grading such

creations, of placing them in critical contexts and preventing plagiarism. So the universities came to extend their role, that of sternly guarding the gate as to what of today's poetry could be acceptably published, reviewed and studied. Moreover, since literary merit was no longer important — or at least no longer the key factor in the way imagined before — the Republic of Letters lacked agreed terms of reference, and so became subject to the factional infighting inevitable when politics usurps proficiency. What Wallace Stevens would have made of it all is an open question. 'If only the boys back in the office could see me now', he said at a poetry reading.

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Reassessing the Poetry of William Carlos Williams

Influence of William Carlos Williams

William Carlos Williams has exercised more influence on contemporary American poetry than anyone else. Outwardly he was far from revolutionary: the middle-class doctor with his busy practice in New Jersey — complete with shady suburban home, wife, two sons, cat, roses and rhododendrons {1} — but he also turned out a steady stream of novelty in poems, articles, short stories, critical studies and novels: over forty titles in all. To the European reactionaries, the poetry of Williams seemed perfunctory, even trite, but the good doctor continued his crusade, from his early days of kinship with Pound and Eliot, through the wilderness years when he found it difficult to place his work, to the 1950s when the Williams template became the foundation for new poetries. Throughout the vicissitudes of fashion, these seemingly unpretentious poems remained rooted in actual American life and speech, though triumphant recognition came only late in life, after strokes had cruelly restricted their author's powers of expression.

New Approaches to Poetry Writing

Williams had little time for poetry on the conformist European model with its rehash of traditions and contrivances. America was a new, self-confident country, and its poetry should be the same: fresh, true to its roots and derived from everyday experience. Partly because his

own work had to be scribbled at intervals snatched from a busy routine, and partly because he saw it as the way forward for American poetry, Williams came to champion the instantaneous response to what was vividly given to the senses. Experience and expression were two sides of the same coin, of course. One could only wait for the heightened moment, though still learning to 'perfect the abilities to record at the moment when the consciousness is enlarged by the sympathies and the unity of understanding that imagination gives.' Many of the poems were improvisations, therefore, whose imperfect nature one had to accept, together with any uninspired phrasing or emotional flatness. He assembled, crafted and extended his jottings, of course, but the emphasis was on maintaining the freshness, the 'just as it came' quality. Indeed that most famous of poem, *The Red Wheelbarrow* took no more than two minutes to dash off: {2}

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

The poem works because the short lines / broken syntax emphasises the visual aspects of the scene, an inheritance from Pound and Chinese poetry. What that 'depends upon' refers to has been much discussed, however — farming, syntax, what poetry expresses, how we view the world {3} — but perhaps means nothing more than what it says, that we can take experiences many ways, but sometimes we should just surrender to the moment and not burden ourselves with what only clouds our animal happiness in being alive. Many of Williams' poems are like this: simple observations in simple language: {4}

The little sparrows
Hop ingenuously
About the pavement
Quarreling
With sharp voices
Over those things
That interest them.

Though sometimes concluding with something weightier: {4}

Then again,
The old man who goes about
Gathering dog lime
Walks in the gutter
Without looking up

And his tread
Is more majestic than
That of the Episcopal minister
Approaching the pulpit

Williams' earlier poems are often called 'imagist', and indeed the movement fascinated him, but from the first he sought something more, to be poetry in the old sense of making something more general from individual experience. He learned from imitating offerings in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury.* His lines, unrhymed as they were, and of varying length, nonetheless arranged words with a keen ear not only for a conversational rhythms but for the sonic properties of individual words. Much 'free verse' of the period is traditional verse with various rules relaxed, but this was something different: homespun American, built from the ground up and owing little to British examples: {5}

It is a willow when summer is over,
a willow by the river
from which no leaf has fallen nor
bitten by the sun
turned orange or crimson.
The leaves cling and grow paler,
swing and grow paler
over the swirling waters of the river
as if loath to let go,

Williams was not an amateur timidly following outdated

fashions. He thought deeply on the theory of poetry, corresponded with fellow Modernists, made trips to see European colleagues in 1924 and 1927, and was published widely in the small presses, albeit making little headway against the influence of Pound and Eliot, whose preoccupation with the past he rejected. Why should we consult Greek and Roman literature when our own town provides such vivid material? Like Somerset Maugham, his medical practice gave him access to the intimate lives of his patients, allowing Williams 'to follow the poor defeated body into those gulfs and grottos..., to be present at deaths and births, at the tormented battles between daughter and diabolic mother.' {6}

In fact, Williams's poems were also sorted and crafted, I suspect, but towards simplicity, and they are not without other, earlier influences: Symbolism for example: {7}

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air

Nor were they entirely spontaneous outpourings, not when extended into ambitious poems: {8}

But—
    Well, you know how

the young girls run giggling
on Park Avenue after dark
when they ought to be home in bed?
Well,
that's the way it is with me somehow.

The line breaks coincide with pauses in the sense in this ending of *January Morning,* and whole poem, small though it be, is packed with acute observation and social context. But is such homely material really the domain of poetry? Could not this section be expressed as prose since the line breaks largely coincide with changes in logic and syntax? Not really:

But, well, you know how the young girls run giggling on Park Avenue after dark when they ought to be home in bed? Well, that's the way it is with me somehow.

The typography is integral to the poem's effect. Rephrasing the poem as a traditional rhyming piece is even more disastrous:

Well, you know how often it is said
of young girls running, giggling, through
the dark, along Park Avenue
when they should be home in bed:
that's how it is with me somehow.

What was idiomatic and charming becomes forced and trite. Why? Because the line breaks are not natural. And because

we judge it other, older standards, I think, against the shadowy memory of thousands of piece we have read from earlier periods, something Williams was trying to prevent. He wanted a new poetry built on new standards.

But the techniques were fairly simple:

To a Poor Old Woman
munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her {9}

Repetition is a favorite device of Williams', a subtle form of reference that calls itself, i.e. like a recursive computer program the 'tasting good' becomes its own frame of reference, excluding any larger reference to social concerns, etc.

Immersion in the Present

If when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc

in silken mists
above shining trees,—
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror {10}

Williams doesn't set the scene in any conventional way but makes reference by immersing himself (and reader) in the sensuously-given immediate present.

Naif Unconventionality

I will teach you my townspeople
how to perform a funeral —
for you have it over a troop
of artists—

unless one should scour the world—
you have the ground sense necessary. {11}

Williams is here with a more abstract frame of reference: what is appropriate to funerals. The poem urges us to spare the ostentatious expense of a conventional send-off and give the money to worthier causes. Is the poem being serious? Of course not. In a world where wealth equates to respect and standing, the poem can only be a little in-joke between friends. As a theme it's hardly worth pursuing, but allows Williams to go into some detail, though the medium has now (1962) become an unlovely prose.

Social Comment

sent out at fifteen to work in
some hard-pressed
house in the suburbs

some doctor's family, some Elsie—
voluptuous water
expressing with broken

brain the truth about us—
her great
ungainly hips and flopping breasts

addressed to cheap
jewelry
and rich young men with fine eyes

as if the earth under our feet
were

an excrement of some sky {12}

The Williams' style breaks down at this point into crude imagery and ungainly prose (though 'voluptuous water' is good) negating any compassion we might feel for the unfortunate Elsie.

Spontaneity can be overdone, therefore. In one sense, all poems are written spontaneously, only the spontaneity doesn't usually last for the whole writing session. Poets have to cut out and re-grow faulty sections, trusting that improvements can be generated spontaneously. And spontaneously again when they're still not satisfactory. Poets also view their creations in a similar fashion, seeing them again with fresh eyes some weeks or months later. Even Williams will have revised his more substantial poems — and most certainly did with *Paterson*, which was years in the making.

Rewriting is also a courtesy to readers, not to waste their time unnecessarily, though it's not one practiced by Modernists overmuch, 'difficulty' being part of the package. Like Eliot with his confusion between emotions expressed and evoked, Williams didn't sufficiently distinguish between spontaneity and the effect of spontaneity: two very different matters. Many poets slave away endlessly — in literary skill by undertaking translations, in understanding by writing or reading literary criticism — until lines come naturally to them, but those lines will still need revision, generally repeatedly, till all the problems are removed, and the lines seem simply given them.

David Perkins {13} indeed raises this point obliquely. After praising Williams for his clean-edged presentation, for the humor, swiftness and marvelous lightness of the lines, their naturalness and ease, he notes that the poems of the 1920s

and 1930s also 'perform less than a poetic line ordinarily does.' Moreover, as such tabbed lines become the norm, their novelty wears off, just as we grow bored with the Duchamp ready-mades once their point is made. The more damaging observation is that the Williams style does not cope well with the complexities of life, or — worse — the simplicity is limiting and/or false to experience.

Paterson

The older poetry was different. It was an elitist art that employed highly complicated devices to refine, shape and emphasize the thoughts and emotions put across: rhetoric, imagery, allusion, rhyme, subtle patterning by meter, even different language, which was far from the everyday. License and responsibility went together: poetry was given great license because it carried great responsibilities, to press language to its limit, to give depth, sensuousness and beauty to everyday experience, expressing as fully and movingly as possible what was important to human beings.

But Williams was having none of this. It wasn't natural. It wasn't contemporary. And it wasn't how he saw life in Rutherford. Why not tell it as it was, when the portrayal would stand for small town life, something quintessentially American? He had written novels of reportage, without plots, and the stage was set for a long poem, the equal of Pound's *Cantos,* but incorporating raw facts rather than Pound's obscure allusions. So came *Paterson*, Williams' long poem in 5-6 books. {14} The verse is written in broken lines of the 'variable foot' but the poem also includes prose passages

taken from historical documents, newspapers, geological surveys, literary texts, and personal letters. The setting is the city of Paterson on the Passaic River near his hometown of Rutherford, but grows into the consciousness of a gigantic, mythic man (Paterson), who is also the author, poet and doctor. Critics spoke approvingly of the first volume, but found later volumes difficult to follow. Added to organizational difficulties — also Pound's problem — was the indigestible nature of the disparate material. The borehole data is an obvious example. What does the following add to the poem? {15}

'SUBSTRATUM

Artesian well at the Passaic Rolling Mill, Paterson.

The following is the tabular account of the specimens found In this well, with the depths at which they were taken, in feet. The boring began in September, 1879, and was continued until November, 1880.

DEPTH DESCRIPTION OF MATERIALS

65 feet. . . Red sandstone, fine
110 feet. . . Red sandstone, coarse
182 feet. . , Red sandstone, and a little shale
400 feet. . . Red sandstone, shaly

[etc., to the concluding:]

2,100 feet. . . Shaly sandstone

At this depth the attempt to bore through the red sandstone was abandoned, the water being altogether unfit for ordinary use. The fact that the rock salt of England, and of some of the other salt mines of Europe, is found in rocks of the same age as this, raises the question whether it may not also be found here. '

That the town sits on rocks making an unsuitable aquifer? No. Williams wanted sensory observations to stand for themselves, without secondary thoughts and inferences getting in the way. The poem then meditates on petrifaction and the deposition of sediments, passing to a snippet of local history, a farmer's wife ill-treated by her husband. No doubt a conventional travel or local history book would have worked the observation into a reflection on the geographical location of the town, or the hardships of the earlier settlers, but Williams wanted readers to simply picture that great mass of rock. Do they? Probably, but reluctantly, I'd have thought. The details become tedious and have no emotional impact. Moreover, as so often with Pound, whose allusions don't add to understanding, the borehole data would have little to say to the professional, the geologist who wants to know the wider setting: age (it's late Triassic to early Jurassic), geographical distribution of the (Passaic) formation, sedimentation features (lacustrine and subaerial), and so forth. Human beings like to make sense of their

surroundings, and bald observations remain just that, not cohering until interpreted and integrated into larger themes.

Far more damaging to the poem were prose snippets of local history, which stand proud of the matrix of indifferent verse. Contrast the mentally conceived: {16}

Jostled as are the waters approaching
the brink, his thoughts
interlace, repel and cut under,
rise rock-thwarted and turn aside
but forever strain forward — or strike
an eddy and whirl, marked by a
leaf or curdy spume, seeming

With the reportage that follows:

'In February 1857, David Hower, a poor shoemaker with a large family, out of work and money, collected a lot of mussels from Notch Brook near the City of Paterson. He found in eating them many hard substances. At first he threw them away but at last submitted some of them to a jeweler who gave him twenty-five to thirty dollars for the lot. Later he found others. One pearl of fine luster was sold to Tiffany for $900 and later to the Empress Eugenie for $2,000 to be known thenceforth as the "Queen Pearl" the finest of its sort in the world today.'

Much of *Paterson* only comes alive in its snippets of local

history — which have been written conventionally, with the story-teller's art that Williams rejects.

The many internet articles {17} on William Carlos Williams point to the vitality of his verse where the line breaks give shape and variety to what would otherwise be prose: {18}

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast-a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

But it's not very effective or distinguished prose. The earlier delicacy in Williams' free verse is disappearing, being replaced by a formula: break the line whenever there's a change in the thought, the tempo or rhythm of the line or where a speaker would make a momentary pause. The trouble is not the use of a colloquial, everyday language per se, which was even to be welcomed after the excesses of high Modernism, but the lameness (verging on banality, if we can speak freely) of its deployment. As we have noted with Pound's Imagism, the objective correlate doesn't work. Emotion is not generated by simply stating something, and Williams' descriptions lack the life-giving touch we expect in

a good travel writer. Poems by Williams make unchallenging teaching material, but they jettison the larger purposes and sophisticated techniques of poetry as was, which demanded more from writer and reader, but also gave more.

Diction: Poetry Before Williams

That style in traditional poetry can be artificial, no one will doubt. The diction of its poetry is a fiction, neither that of the speaker nor the audience. Subtle conventions apply, which change with the period and the genre. Meditations on death are not written as limericks, etc. At its most basic, etymology is important, since the Saxon, Norman or Latin root gives words their characters and dispositions. Too idiomatic an expression calls up the mundane, and is inappropriate in many instances. The poetic diction of the eighteenth century, though much derided today, was an attempt to remove contemporary and irrelevant associations of words and so release the full potential of their primary meanings. Greek classical verse contains hundreds of words, verbal forms and constructions that are not found in prose. {19} Homer's language is a mixture of dialects, and Dante wrote in a similarly eclectic vein.

But an abstract language is not necessarily a dead language. 'Our literacy program will make Government more transparent, and bring opportunities to the many still disadvantaged in rural communities', says the political pamphlet. 'First remove screw-retaining devices E and G', says the workshop manual. Both are using language suited to their purposes, and conceptual and direct vocabularies

are not easily interchanged, both standing on their intentions and their results.

Lexicons are governed by social usage. The Elizabethans embroidered words with religious, courtly and pastoral associations, but these trappings were gradually dropped when the eighteenth century imposed a more correct and classical diction. The Romantics introduce a new inner world with cold, pale, grey, home, child, morning, memory, ear, feel, hold, sleep, turn, weep, etc. Later came moon, stir, water, body, shadow, house. The mid-nineteenth century popularized dead, red, rain, stone. Nineteen thirties poetry was packed with references to industrial buildings and political change. {20}

Words do not possess wholly transparent meanings, and in the more affective poetry their latent associations, multiple meanings, textural suggestions and rhythmic power are naturally given freer rein. But the touchstone is always the audience, even the audience of one. Words too familiar, or too remote, defeat the purpose of a poet, said Samuel Johnson, and that observation remains true, as much for traditionalists writing inside a poetic tradition as for others trying to kindle poetry out of naked experience.

Words create mood and context, and for this purpose old-sounding, old-fashioned, or obsolete words have often been employed, even by the greatest of poets — Virgil, Ronsard, Spenser. Aristotle stipulated that there should be a mixture

of ordinary and unfamiliar words in the language of poetry. Ordinary words made for clarity. Unfamiliar words (which included metaphors but not obscure technicalities) made the language shine, and avoided the appearance of meanness and the prosaic. {16} And of course language should be appropriate to context.

So arose the understanding that words were not good or bad in themselves, but only by virtue of their placing in a line. Languages like English allow considerable variety. Into *He said shortly that she was not to go.* the word *however* can be inserted correctly, if a little awkwardly, into all positions, giving not only rhythmic flexibility but nuances of meaning. But poets have generally wanted more. If the standard word order in English is subject, verb object, that order is not followed in these percentages of lines overall: Pope 32%, Milton 19%, Shelley 15%, Shakespeare and Tennyson 12%. Perhaps the commonest variation was hyperbaton, inversion of noun and adjective. {21}

All this was anathema to Williams, of course, but F.L. Lucas's observation {19} that, while poetry can certainly be written without poetic diction, it is immeasurably the poorer for it, calls for some deeper understanding of reference and allusion. Bakhtin {18-19} stressed the multi-layered nature of language, which he called heteroglossia. Not only are there social dialects, jargons, turns of phrase characteristic of the various professions, industries, commerce, of passing fashions, etc., but also socio-ideological contradictions

carried forward from various periods and levels in the past. Language is not a neutral medium that can be simply appropriated by a speaker, but something that comes to us populated with the intentions of others. Every word tastes of the contexts in which it has lived its socially-charged life. Bakhtin's concepts go further than Derrida's notion of 'trace', or Foucault's archaeology of political usage. Words are living entities, things that are constantly being employed and partly taken over, carrying opinions, assertions, beliefs, information, emotions and intentions of others, which we partially accept and modify. {22-23}

Bakhtin also argued that, for poems to achieve autonomy and artistic unity, these polyglot social contexts (heteroglossia) had to be fused together, losing their worlds of reference. The matter is no doubt technical, perhaps contentious, but we can surely accept that words don't operate in social vacuums, and must therefore allude to previous usage.

Reference and Allusion

However notable it seems, and sometimes overdone, allusion is not limited to Modernist poetry, but occurs in all poetry. To summarize matters quickly: {24} Bad poets merely borrow, where good poets steal, i.e. make the borrowings distinctly their own. Many poems used words or phrases borrowed from the poetry of other authors, but allusion means more than plagiarism or poetic diction, and something other than extended simile. {21} There are several terms in use — reinscription (amplifications of

previous texts), quotation (taking over the previous text in its entirety, including concept and texture), echo (lacking conscious intention) and intertextuality (involuntary incorporation of previous word usage and associations {25}) — but a literary allusion is an explicit or implicit reference to another literary text that can be recognized and understood as such by competent readers. {26}

Allusion is conventionally used to add historical depth, suggest an association with literary excellence., display literary knowledge, advertise membership of a poetic tradition or community, suggest an association with literary excellence, show topicality by reference to recent events, sharpen contrasts, as in satire, and imply a generality of experience, often the human condition.

Allusion is the staple of many poetic traditions. Islamic poetry draws heavily on the Koran, as Jewish {27} and Christian {28-29} poetry does on the Bible. Until the late nineteenth century, and even beyond, {30} English poetry also made much use of Classical allusion.{31} The Chinese indeed expect to find repeated allusion in poetry, and some of Du Fu's late poems, for example, have *every* word or phrase alluding to usage in the illustrious past. {32} Japanese poetry even laid down rules governing its use. {33} Modernist poetry also employs its own brand of allusion, sometimes shifting the frames of reference to matters mediated by contentious theory. {34-35} Most strikingly is this seen in Ezra Pound's work, which serves as

a benchmark for Williams' own use of reference. (Readers only interested in Williams can skip this section: it's not vital to the argument.)

Digression to Pound's *Cantos* (1925-60)

Ideograms

Ezra Pound's allusions were initially simple quotes, which evoked the work from which they were taken, giving the *Cantos* a thickness and seriousness of meaning. But they could also be juxtaposed, which set up shocks and interrelations in the reader. By 1927, the approach had developed into what Pound called ideograms, where the component images interacted 'simultaneously to present a complex of meaning'. {36} Take, for example, lines 36-44 of *Canto XXX*:

Came Madam 'Yle
Clothed with the light of the altar
And with the price of the candles.
'Honour? Balls for yr honour!
Take two million and swallow it.'
Is come Messire Alfonso
And is departed by boat for Ferrara
And has passed here without saying 'O'.

Pound is referring to the proxy marriage of Alfonso d'Este to Lucrezia Borgia (whom he calls Madame Hyle, the Greek

word for matter), which reflects the sexual and monetary corruption of the Papacy under the Borgias. In larger context, this and surrounding stanzas illustrate Pound's belief that Baroque art had subverted the purity of the Italian primitives, and that the taste and vigor of families like the d'Este were preferable to the 'usury' of contemporary banking institutions. {37)

Historical and Topical Allusion

The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent shoulders
Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,
Thus Ben and la Clara a Milano
by the heels at Milano {38}

The lines conflate the Fascist claims to bring social justice to Italy with the deaths of both the founder of the Manichean religion and of Benito Mussolini and his mistress in the closing stages of WWII. Pound wrote this opening section of the *Pisan Cantos* when the death of his hero was still fresh in his mind, and when he himself faced prosecution for treason.

Literary Parodies

Oh to be in England now that Winston's out
Now that there's room for doubt
And the bank may be the nation's

And the long years of patience
And labour's vacillations
May have let the bacon come home, {39}

The section starts with a parody of Browning's *Home Thoughts from Abroad*, {40} and moves into political comment on the Labor Government returned in elections after WWII. Pound is still identifying with the Axis powers.

Good Guy Stereotypes

Pound's allusions can also descend to a sort of chinoiserie, a simplistic view of the orient and elsewhere. His good guys in *Canto LV*, for example, are not merely caricatures, but mishandle Chinese history.

Came OUEN-TSONG and kicked out 3000 fancies
let loose the falcons

yet he also was had by the eunuchs after 15 years reign
OU-TSONG destroyed hochang pagodas,
spent his time drillin' and huntin'
Brass idols turned into ha'pence
chased out the bonzes from temples
46 thousand temples . . . {41}

These allude to 'true events' of course, as PhD theses and student's guides demonstrate, {42-45}, but only in the sense that events in 'A Child's First Book of the Saints' are

true, as simple pictures. Economic matters, and more so the structure of Chinese society, {46-48} are too complex (and fascinating) to be properly represented by such cut-out figures. The allusions baffle the common reader and exasperate the knowledgeable, so failing in their primary task, which is to illustrate, support and enlarge our understanding of Pound's stress on good governance.

Private Allusions

so that leaving America I brought with me $80
and England a letter of Thomas Hardy's
and Italy one eucalyptus pip
from the salita that goes up from Rapallo {49}

The allusions here are clear enough to anyone who knows Pound's life, but the memories, or rather what they meant to Pound, stay private.

Pretension

If Basil sing of Shah Nameh, and wrote
{Frdwsi in Farsi}
Firdush' on his door
Thus saith Kabir: 'Politically' said Rabindranath
they are inactive. They think, but then there is
climate, they think but it is warm or there are flies
or some insects' {50}

Pound was inclined to air his knowledge by playing the 'village explainer'. Persian and Hindi themes seem hardly relevant in this example, and even Firdush' is misspelt, unless this is one of Pound's chummy improvisations. Kabir {51} is a very different writer from Ferdowsi, {52} and Rabindranath Tagore's {53} comment seems little more than name-dropping.

For all his opposition to Pound's theories, however, Williams also makes reference, constantly in his *Paterson,* but with a difference. Pound rewrote the material, weaving it into the fabric of his verse, or attempting to do so. William lifted the material wholesale, where traditional devices, hitherto regarded as essential — rhyme, meter, alliteration, etc. — could be seen as hindrances to sincerity or creativity. But there were also verse passages in *Paterson* as baffling as Pound's:

For the beginning is assuredly
the end — since we know nothing, pure
and simple, beyond
our own complexities.
Yet there is
no return: rolling up out of chaos,
a nine months' wonder, the city
the man, an identity — it can't be
otherwise — an
interpenetration, both ways. {54}

And this, referring to a flower:

Were we near enough its stinking breath
would fell us. The temple upon
the rock is its brother, whose majesty
lies in jungles — are made to spring,
at the rifle-shot of learning: to kill
and grind those bones:
These terrible things they reflect:
the snow falling into the water,
part upon the rock, part in the dry weeds {55}

A third example, of very many scattered throughout the poem:

A delirium of solutions, forthwith, forces
him into back streets, to begin again:
up hollow stairs among acrid smells
to obscene rendezvous. And there he finds
a festering sweetness of red lollipops —
and a yelping dog:

Come YEAH, Chichi! Or a great belly
that no longer laughs but mourns
with its expressionless black navel love's
deceit.

They are the divisions and imbalances
of his whole concept, made weak by pity,

flouting desire; they are — No ideas but
in the facts {56}

And so on. Pound can be obscure in learned ways, which academic research can generally decipher. Williams is obscure in more direct ways, by presenting observations and thoughts shorn of their connecting matter or context.

Asphodel

I have been arguing that Williams' poetry is very limited. The poems 'work' only when restricted to simple observations or narratives. They become incoherent when making more abstract or general statements, at least on the evidence of *Paterson*. But perhaps the test is unfair. If Pound failed in his *Cantos* it's unreasonable to expect Williams to succeed in his own extended poem. So let's look at *Asphodel*, {57} written in the stepped down, three foot he developed for *Paterson 2,* which was called 'one of the most beautiful poems in the language' by W.H. Auden. {58} It was originally intended as continuation of *Paterson*, where Williams could put everything left over, but came to be a celebration of his married life, and — most importantly — an apology for several affairs, of which his wife knew little or nothing. It was a particularly difficult period for Williams: his life was threatened by the likelihood of another stroke, his appointment as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress had been withdrawn over alleged communist sympathies, and he spent two months in a psychiatric hospital being treated for depression. He wrote several letters to Flossie confessing to affairs, so that the poem also asks for

forgiveness. It was time, if anything, for searing, heartfelt truth.

Yet the poem has difficulties where it shouldn't, even with its central symbol, the asphodel. Williams calls it 'that greeny thing' and claims to have collected and pressed it as a child between the pages of a book. But the asphodel he collected in New Jersey is not the plant the ancient world imagined carpeting the meadows of the underworld, but a different species altogether. Neither is it a greeny thing exactly ('Of asphodel, that greeny flower/ like a buttercup / upon its branching stem — / save that it's green and wooden'), but a striking flower with a slight perfume, i.e. not the odorless plant he describes in his most celebrated section of the poem:

As I think of it now,
        after a lifetime,
                it is as if
a sweet-scented flower
        were poised
                and for me did open.
Asphodel
        has no odor
                save to the imagination
but it too
        celebrates the light.
                It is late
but an odor

as from our wedding
has revived for me
and begun again to penetrate
into all crevices
of my world.

With its accessible lyricism, the poem won a wide readership, the critical world approaching the poem with tenderness, and indeed reverence. 'Although I almost feel it as an impertinence to offer a commentary to this poem,' said Peter Lang. {59} But here we have 'odor' as a linking reference: a married life that opened as a sweet flower, the asphodel that has an odor only in imagination, and then an odor 'as from our wedding' penetrating his life again. Perhaps what Wiliams really meant was that even an asphodel, which has no odor, smells sweet in memory, just as his marriage did again — technically incorrect but understandable. Or perhaps it was a more general comment on the past we cannot regain except in imagination. Readers are entitled to clarity on key points, however, and Williams could have looked up the asphodel's natural history in the local library, at least in correcting the poem. After all, the Williams line

is always
easy to write.

There are no rhymes to find, no individual line rhythms to be fitted into an overall meter, none of the umpteen traditional devices that take time and skill to employ.

The language of *Asphodel* is generally simple, and, where simple, works: 'Hear me out. / Do not turn away. / I have learned much in my life / from books / and out of them / about love. / Death is not the end of it.' Trouble comes when Williams tries to say more: 'All women are not Helen, / I know that, / but have Helen in their hearts. / My sweet, / you have it also, therefore / I love you / and could not love you otherwise.' Why the 'therefore'? And does Williams intend both meanings of 'otherwise'? What happened to the 'love you for yourself alone' aspect, the Flossie with the pink slippers? More trouble comes when Williams moves beyond simple statement: 'Then follows / what we have dreaded— / but it can never / overcome what has gone before.' And 'But love and the imagination / are of a piece, / swift as the light / to avoid destruction.' Couldn't this have been opened out into proper sense?

No one could dislike *Asphodel*, but its language did not rise to emotional heights, being generally rather prosaic ('The generous earth itself / gave us lief. / The whole world / became my garden!'), or even pedestrian (' When I was a boy / I kept a book / to which, from time / to time, / I added pressed flowers / until, after a time, / had a good collection.') The simplicity served its purpose, as doubtless did the acclaim, since praise for Williams was praise for a contemporary poetry still not popular and even well-regarded. But pamphleteers who do not question their assumptions may also end up being limited by them.

Looking Ahead

To the many advocates of an all-American way, the poetry of William Carlos Williams seems abundantly alive, honest and progressive. To adherents of older traditions, Williams' poetry will seem willfully limited, perhaps misguided when art is such a sophisticated and complicated matter. But the fault, if fault it was, does not simply lie with Williams' basic English. Unadorned sentences can do marvelous things, provided everything they say is closely relevant. To Humbert, the object his perverted and disastrous desire first appears in Nabokov's *Lolita* as:

'She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.'

Behind this directness lies a host of understandings and social usages, not least of them irony and Lolita's own inclinations. In contrast, the happy primitivism of Williams, which should have created strength, too often leads to sentimental over-writing, to milking the reader of emotion beyond what is reasonable in the circumstances — here not helped by the Jack and Jill language: {12}

The birds in winter
and in summer the flowers
those are her two joys
— to cover her secret sorrow

Love is her sorrow
over which at heart
she cries for joy by the hour
— a secret she will not reveal

Her ohs are ahs
her ahs are ohs
and her sad joys
fly with the birds and blossom
with the rose

But the value of Williams to later poets can hardly be overestimated. He paved the way to open forms, poems that grew naturally as they were written, i.e. rather than being constrained by verse form or expectations of the past. He based poetry on simple facts and observation. He wrote lines that were always serviceable, without any need to be beautiful, apt or striking in any way. And, lastly, his typography, sidestepping the integration of individual speech rhythms into an overall meter, were only a step away from the 'chopped up prose' that was to become the favored style of thoughtful, serious poetry.

But the cost is the banality of serious poetry today. Just how odd is this contemporary scene of diminished expectations in the context of world literature is probably not grasped by academics and their students. Nor are the limitations in the extraordinary achievements of the Modernists. Yeats made a poetry out his own beliefs, however limited or bizarre. Eliot's

shattered the old world of letters with *The Wasteland*, and terrorized the opposition with his critical acumen. Pound tried to compress all that is worth knowing into his increasingly obscure *Cantos.* Williams replaced what had hitherto been poetry by segmented, homespun prose. All were fiercely committed men, ideologues, and perhaps a little unhinged. Only Wallace Stevens seems to have been genuinely bemused by his late fame, though he pursued his theories just as seriously, at some cost to his marriage and common sense.

All four set poetry on a new path, and one arguably more suitable to the 'century of the common man'. New ways were needed after the horrors of W.W.I, which shook the European civilizations just as grievously as had the Mongol invasions shaken the Islamic world six centuries before. And, as with Islamic world, which saw a loss in faith and an emphasis on the letter rather than the spirit of the law, so the old order in Europe with its refinement and social values was set aside for the sturdily commonplace, the factual, the 'not to be kidded' attitude of the so-called 'modern sensibility'. But the loss is still considerable. That larger world of depth, transcendence and sensibility, which sustains poetry on its longer flights of imagination, was termed passé and inauthentic, and a new order, with even less intellectual justification, had to be imposed with all the fervor of revolutionary causes.

In fact, far from being inauthentic, the previous language of

poetry served a social need, which was to renew and re-invigorate the names of things mankind thought important. It was not formerly the purpose of poetry to make everything new — which has required contemporary poetry to stake out diminishing plots in ever-more inhospitable ground — but to base the new world on the contours of the old, i.e. to find in new contexts what was previously seen as life-enhancing, deep-rooted and/or eternal in human nature.

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The Poetry of W.H. Auden: A Critical Review

Introduction: The Early Work

What happened? Throughout the nineteen thirties, W.H. Auden was the most exciting, talented and prolific of poets writing in English. Eliot had the unrivalled authority, but his views were backward-looking, indeed reactionary: high church in religion and a royalist in politics. Auden, in contrast, was wholly contemporary, at home in the everyday fears, interests and fashions of thirties England, with an overt sympathy for left-wing causes, which he approached through a formidable reading in psychoanalysis, Marxism, existentialism and much else. Everything seemed grist to his wheel. Poems in the most challenging forms were dashed off effortlessly: indeed he would rather write a new poem than bother improving an old one. {1}

As a school-teacher in Scotland and then England, Auden produced a continuous steam of poetry collections, plays, critical reviews and essays: nine books of poetry in ten years. As a young man barely turned 30, when most poets are struggling to find their voice, Auden had astonished the literary world with a range of voices, each his own, and was editing the *Oxford Book of Light Verse*. When, in the following year, he moved to America, again teaching in schools and colleges, the flood of publications continued: poetry collections, choral works, literary criticism and essays on matters from Greek literature and Icelandic sagas to modern poetry, folklore, children's literature, history,

biography and anything that attracted his fluent pen and mind. He won the *Bollingen Prize* in 1954, and the *Feltrinelli* in 1957. From 1956 to 1961 he served as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. The sixties, indeed right up to his sudden death in Vienna in 1973, saw essays, librettos and introductions to his collected works. The contrast with the abstemious Eliot or the monomaniacal Pound could not be starker. Auden accurately sensed the changing moods of the times, and adroitly adapted to its needs. {1}

Auden's move to America was not a run for cover, from the war everyone knew was coming, but escape from a restricting and depressing period in British social life. {2} Strikes, business collapses, unemployment, breadlines, political agitation in the face of ineffective government, and the threatening rise of Fascism in Germany and Italy — all stared out daily from newspapers and contributed to a deepening sense of helplessness. {3} Auden saw himself as lonely, ineffectual and miserable. His visits to China and Spain left him only the more discouraged, and the brave hopes featuring in the poetry also seemed half-hearted and unconvincing, as though detached from any personal commitment, from what their author really thought. Critics called the poetry over-clever, supercilious even: the glittering aphorisms of a 'permanent undergraduate'. But Auden's espousals of Freud and Marxism were not merely fashionable: they were the echo-soundings that warned of the depths surrounding our everyday lives. Whatever the personal failings, Auden was a moralist at heart, and the

identifications allowed him to probe the doom and guilt that afflicted Europe, {4} either its relatively privileged classes, contemporary society, or man himself.

the poets exploding like bombs
The walks by the lake, the winter of perfect communion;
Tomorrow the bicycle races
Through the suburbs on summer evenings. {5}

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate. {6}

One rational voice is dumb.
Over his grave
the household of Impulse mourns one dearly loved:
sad is Eros, builder of cities,
and weeping anarchic Aphrodite. {7}

But what was Auden's position exactly? It was hard to know: the poetry could be contradictory or somewhat incoherent as the dark and bright were twisted together, no doubt reflecting Auden's own shifting hopes and despairs, which were those of anyone thinking beyond the distractions of a 'low, dishonest decade.'

Some of the more successful poems were those that simply took an animal delight in being alive — 'Look Stranger'.

Look, stranger, on this island now
The leaping light for your delight discovers,
Stand stable here
And silent be, {8}

Yet even these have not lasted, perhaps because their lyric quality was only good in parts, a common criticism of Auden. They were good, or good enough, but lacked that blood-chilling frisson of exact expression. That last point is worth stressing because so overlooked by historians of Modernism. Good poets steal, i.e. wholly take over and improve on predecessor's work, but Auden's copies were generally half-hearted affairs, lacking the sustained verse craft that really makes the difference. 'May with its light behaving':

May with its light behaving
Stirs vessel, eye and limb,
The singular and sad
Are willing to recover,
And to each swan-delighting river
The careless picnics come
In living white and red. {9}

Has echoes of Yeats, though the symbols were Auden's and more unsettling. He developed his own style or styles, where there was a good deal of wit, compression, ambiguity and syntactic liberty, but the poetry had a provisional air, more work in progress than completed. He adopted Anglo-Saxon

forms, with intriguing but rather baffling perspectives:

"O where are you going?" said reader to rider,
"That valley is fatal when furnaces burn,
Yonder's the midden whose odors will madden,
That gap is the grave where the tall return." {10}

And Byron's *Don Juan* stanzas, but with little of the original's polish, brio or sheer good fun:

I hope this reaches you in your abode,
This letter that's already far too long,
Just like the Prelude or the Great North Road;
But here I end my conversational song.
I hope you don't think mail from strangers wrong.
As to its length, I tell myself you'll need it,
You've all eternity in which to read it. {11}

Poems on social themes could be strikingly original in their imagery — everything was pressed into service — but also somewhat haphazardly put together, with a looseness of phrasing that belongs more to prose:

Seekers after happiness, all who follow
The convolutions of your simple wish,
It is later than you think; nearer that day
Far other than that distant afternoon
Amid rustle of frocks and stamping feet
They gave the prizes to the ruined boys.

You cannot be away, then, no
Not though you pack to leave within an hour,
Escaping humming down arterial roads : {12}

'Humming' is excellent, of course, but what does the reader make of 'stamping' or 'ruined', and do not the para-rhymes come a bit too easily in this earlier section of the poem, even glibly so?

Your shutting up the house and taking prow
To go into the wilderness to pray,
Means that I wish to leave and to pass on,
Select another form, perhaps your son ;

The Consolidating Reputation

Auden's four long poems in the forties consolidated his reputation — *New Year Letter* (1941), *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944), *For the Time Being* (1944), and The *Age of Anxiety* (1947). Each aimed to clarify Auden's views and make him more accessible to readers. The first was a didactic, argumentative poem in tetrameter couplets that ranged across politics, ethics, aesthetics and religion. The second, subtitled 'A Commentary on Shakespeare's *the Tempest*', has the characters of Shakespeare's play say something of the relation of art and imagination (mirror) to reality (sea). Each character speaks in a different verse form, a technical tour de force by Auden. {13-15} *For the Time Being* was written as a Christmas oratorio, later being set to music as an abridgement. The last, subtitled *A Baroque Eclogue*, has four characters emblematic of the

lonely crowd, who meet in a bar and discuss where mankind is going, a quest overshadowed by contemporary rootlessness and anxiety.

The Sea and the Mirror has probably survived best, and two of its poems are much anthologized. *The Song of the Master and Boatswain* {16} is a simple and accomplished piece, pleasingly rounded off. It starts:

At Dirty Dick's and Sloppy Joe's
We drank our liquor straight,
Some went upstairs with Margery,
And some, alas, with Kate;
And two by two like cat and mouse
The homeless played at keeping house.

The popular but enigmatic villanelle of *Miranda to Ferdinand* is another matter: {17}

1. My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely,
2. As the poor and sad are real to the good king,
3. And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

4. Up jumped the Black Man behind the elder tree,
5. Turned a somersault and ran away waving;
6. My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely.

7. The Witch gave a squawk; her venomous body
8. Melted into light as water leaves a spring,

9. And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

10. At his crossroads, too, the Ancient prayed for me,
11. Down his wasted cheeks tears of joy were running:
12. My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely.

13. He kissed me awake, and no one was sorry;
14. The sun shone on sails, eyes, pebbles, anything,
15. And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

16. So to remember our changing garden, we
17. Are linked as children in a circle dancing:
18. My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely,
19. And the high, green hill sits always by the sea.

The villanelle is a limiting form — 19 lines , five triplets, and a quatrain, employing only two rhymes throughout — and is generally used to convey mood, as it is here, with some contrivance. But what does the haunting first line really say? On one level, as 'Gaby' points out: {18}

The repeating lines "My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely/And the high, green hills sits always by the sea" shows her happiness at finding her "dear one" and the eternity of their union compared to the mirrors constant loneliness. These ideas relate to the metaphor of the mirror always winning against the sea because it can become the sea by reflecting it. However, the mirror is a euphemism of loneliness because it only reflects the image of something

and can never be eternally bonded, like Miranda is singing of with her impending union.

That's plausible, and mirror is central to the whole piece, serving as evocative imagination, of something that is both there and not there. But the effect is distinctly odd. Mirrors are eternally lonely, while Miranda is only so at the moment, anticipating union with Ferdinand — a union that will be eternal in the sense that mirrors are eternally lonely. Yes, but that's disconcerting, carrying the overtone that Miranda's longing will be eternal. Line 2 underlines that eternity — the good king always has responsibilities to his needy subjects — but also introduces the sense of justice and good will. Eternity is again the subject of line 3.

Lines 4 and 5 may well be the nightmares of childhood, to be banished by Miranda's union with Ferdinand, but 'Black Man' is capitalized and a little incongruous in the setting, almost surrealist. Then we have the Witch (lines 7-8) whose venomous body melts into light, just as water leaves a spring, i.e. thins away. Again the effect is anomalous. Springs are associated with purity and life-giving powers, but here the association is reversed, with venom being dispersed into the air or sunlight. In lines 10-11 we are introduced to the Ancient, whose tears of joy echo the spring earlier. What the Ancient is doing at the crossroads isn't clear. The 'He' in line 13 is presumably Ferdinand, though it could be the Ancient (again disturbing), but it's apparently a happy occasion, with the sun shining on

everything. Finally, in lines 16-17, an unspecified 'we' are to remember a garden where we are linked as children dancing in a circle — a celebration, or a throw-back to the 'innocence' of childhood?

Many of these images, vivid no doubt, are also discordant, unconvincing and not properly thought through. Equally unsatisfactory is the verse. The first line is a beauty:

My dear one is mine as mirr ors are lone ly,

And the second just about gets by, though the line is stretched out in monosyllables:

As the poor and sad are real to the good king,

The third line is an oddity: why wrong-foot the line by adding 'green'?

And the high green hill sits al ways by the sea.

It would be so much more pleasing, in metrical structure and assonance, as:

And the high hill sits al ways by the sea.

Line 4 could be scanned several ways but if we want to preserve the quatrain, four stresses to the line structure, we'd write something like (though el der should strictly take

a stress):

Up jumped the Black Man be hind the elder tree,

Ditto line 5.

Turned a som er sault and ran a way wav ing;

By line 7, the metrical structure has broken down, and line 8 is prose. The rhyming is casual, indeed rather wretched, falling on the unstressed syllable very often. In short, it's not very good verse, the test of which is that it cannot easily be improved upon. This, unfortunately, can. If we keep the good lines, retain the rhyme schemes, continue the four stress rather loose meter of the opening line, but make a few diversions, we can write:

My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely,
As sadness is real to the good king,
And the high hill sits always by the sea.

Up jumped the Black Man from the elder tree,
Turned head to heel and ran away laughing;
My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely.

All that is venomous in the Witch's body
Broke into sunlight in the bubbling spring,
And the high hill sits always by the sea.

The Wise in their fortune will pray for me;
His tears of great joy wet the wedding ring.
My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely.

He kissed me awake, and no one was sorry,
Alive was the sunlight on everything,
And the high hill sits always by the sea.

The garden is changing in memory,
And the circlet of children link arms and sing:
My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely,
And the high hill sits always by the sea.

And so on. Once the key lines are established it's not that difficult a measure, and Auden could have done more with it.

In other work of the forties, Auden developed a jaunty, and, later, a chatty style with which to confront the demons of the modern world: anxiety, guilt, defeat, purposeless of living. The phrasing can be very casual, not far from the happy approximations of amateur poetry, though knowingly so, and with a wider range of allusion and example. Auden was unusually alert to influences, particularly those of other poets, which he could easily mimic and make his own. Inevitably, because a feature of Modernism, those features included the accumulation of instances, a collage of matters only vaguely connected.

Auden's own life became somewhat similar: spasmodic and

untidy, held together by the steady writing through a quotidian of drugs, alcohol and ménages a deux, trois and purchased. {19} Yet it was one that kept him cheerfully and campishly alive to the age of 66. Auden accepted his homosexuality, and there was none of the self-loathing of Hart Crane, or the brooding destructiveness in Robert Lowell's attachments. Auden's commitment to poetry ended with poetry.

The Later Auden

After the earlier communism and psychoanalysis, there were no social issues or religious messages compelling Auden to write to the late hours. He reverted to what he had been before, the precocious schoolboy, indifferent to convention and community standards, but now even more well-read, pugnacious and diverting. For that range of observation, Auden developed a flexible syllabic verse, where words are used in their prose sense, without depth as Perkins puts it, {1} but intelligently. Because verse writing came so easily to Auden — he could slot in sentences largely as he wanted — there is little of that search to get words that won't be shifted to do unexpected things. The earlier, spasmodic but real, flashes of genius came less often. Auden was more settled and content in himself, and so was the poetry. Auden left the doom-ridden vexations of British life and became interested in music, opera, Christianity, the influences of weather and the landscape.

Critics are therefore divided over the later work. Many admire its range, poise and urbane good sense. To others,

something is missing. It's not dull exactly, but nor does it quicken the blood. What Auden says could have been said by any accomplished writer of book reviews, not perhaps so fluently and concisely, but the poems do not differ in essence from the better Christmas letter we get from friends keeping us up to date with their pondered thoughts and doings. Auden's poetry belongs to its time, but is not news that stays news, as Pound put it. Gradually the content assumed more importance than its expression, and those exacting forms that Auden handled so easily became handy containers, a 'see what I can pour into these shapes' rather than 'through these forms what I'm trying to say may perhaps shift into focus'.

Sometimes the verse was not really verse at all, but a sort of smooth, homogenized mixture of verse and prose.

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)

And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.

Some was simply doggerel.

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,
But on earth indifference is the least
We have to dread from man or beast.
How should we like it were stars to burn
With a passion for us we could not return? {22}

And much, as always, was over-facile. Auden came to hate the closing lines of *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*, and the uses to which they were put, but perhaps should not have written such platitudes in the first place. Yet throughout the flood of work, at least in snatches, there were glimpses of the Auden that could have been: {23}

Warm are the still and lucky miles,
White shores of longing stretch away,
A light of recognition fills
The whole great day, and bright
The tiny world of lovers' arms.

And: {24}

Taller to-day, we remember similar evenings,
Walking together in a windless orchard

Where the brook runs over the gravel, far from the glacier.

Too often, however, Auden was simply the poster child of a Modernism where anything went. The *Stop All the Clocks*, made well-known by *Four Weddings and a Funeral* film, is a typically indifferent piece of verse, with a flat last line: {25}

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Poem endings were often a problem for Auden, and many have self-satisfied, over-obvious character, as though after leading the reader over intellectual obstacle courses, the poet can end with something about which we can all agree.

In fact, Auden was a disciplined writer who, whatever the private difficulties, sat down and conscientiously applied himself, generally from early morning to early afternoon. {19} That routine became his life, opening a window on the world in which he could become a leading spokesman for a Modernism now going about its business in contemporary dress. Much of the prose written in those hectic years is still readable: disarmingly modest, intelligent and to the point. {26} Auden's mind was unusually lively, capacious and well-informed, and he knew personally many of his important contemporaries, keeping abreast of their writing, and staying alert to new schools and tendencies. He was popular

and prolific, and if only a handful of lines or poems are now remembered, it is an extraordinary achievement to have anything give delight to busy men long after we are dead.

But the unconscionable fact remains that the best and most popular poems — *As I Walked Out One Evening* {27}, *The Fall of Rome* {28}, *Lullaby* {29}, *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* {4}, *The Shield of Achilles* {30} — owed little or nothing to Modernism. Make it new, insisted Modernist theory, and Auden's creative mind turned out poems that were singularly and arrestingly different, firstly by taking old forms into new realms and later by developing his own urbane, balanced and many-layered styles. Pack the poem with fresh images, said theory, and Auden's poems teem with contemporary images drawn in their particularity from all walks of life. Yet neither approach was vindicated by results, or — to put it another way — created the most successful poems, as these are still traditional, or seem so to us now.

The flag-wavers for Modernism {1} find the early poems the more exciting, as they indeed are: experimental, innovative, unconventional. But Auden also rounded the circle of his gifts, and the school intellectual turned himself into avuncular after-dinner guest who kept the conversation ball spinning in the air with a self-delighting display of charm, wit and sophistication as each theme was picked up, deftly treated and dissolved in another. Clever, engaging, truly delightful, said his more thoughtful contemporaries, but not the real thing: nothing to touch the imaginative faculty or

the deep well-pools of the heart. {31} But under its chain-smoking, unconventional poster child, Modernism had become something different, a more intellectual art, which Auden's careless facility made entertaining. Modernism, or Auden's particular take on Modernism, gave the enfant terrible his spell-bound audience, though it also greatly limited what Modernism could say, providing the common reader with unexpected displays of fireworks rather than the careful illumination of their inner or larger natures.

If only Auden had not been so clever, or so keen to show off that cleverness, we might think, but Modernism, to be accessible and entertaining, needed its unabashed, often failing performer who charmingly refused to be other than himself.

As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman:
The clouds rift suddenly — look there
At cigarette-end smouldering on a border
At the first garden party of the year.
Pass on, admire the view of the massif
Through plate-glass windows of the Sport hotel;
Join there the insufficient units
Dangerous, easy, in furs, in uniform
And constellated at reserved tables
Supplied with feelings by an efficient band
Relayed elsewhere to farmers and their dogs
Sitting in kitchens in the stormy fens. {32}

We can claim that the poetry comes out as byproduct in that social reportage because its writer was a poet, but it's probably more helpful to call it an extension of the objective correlate discussed under Ezra Pound, {3} here extended into the sociological realm. In retrospect, to the degree it works at all, its success seems only to be as the individual phrases are successful — notably 'the stormy fens' — which, of course, only defers the question of what poetry is, and how it should be written for the common reader. That was a matter neither Auden or later schools of poetry could quite agree on, beyond complex generalities, which have come to serve academic critics more than poets.

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Duplicities of Meaning: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill

Few poets can have been so obviously gifted, and Geoffrey Hill enjoyed an exceptionally successful career as poet, literary critic and academic. He was born of working class parents in 1932, won a scholarship to Oxford, and then went on to hold increasingly prestigious academic appointments until retiring as Professor of Literature and Religion at Boston University. His first book of poems, *For the Unfallen*, hailed as one of the most outstanding collections of the decade, was followed, by despairing silence, but eventually, some nine years later, came the equally impressive *King Log*. Less taxing collections — *Mercian Hymns, Tenebrae* and *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* — followed. With those arduously-composed poems behind him, there appeared a flood of publications, now in free verse form but often difficult to follow. His isolated position notwithstanding, Hill was knighted for services to literature in 2012, and from 2010 to 2015 served as Oxford Professor of Poetry. {1}

The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill and its Themes

In reality, of course, there had always been difficulties, some arising from the stress of maintaining so high a standard, {2} but more from Hill’s doubts over words themselves: their truth, their meaning, their authority — in short, what's entailed in using them responsibly, both today and in the past. {3}

The early work was a late High Modernism, {4} more accomplished (and sometimes more mannered) than that of Eliot or Lowell, where Hill displayed a mastery of traditional techniques: rhyme, tight stanza forms, arresting images and exact phrasing. To readers who cared for English verse, the poems were a delight, but it was a delight tempered by difficult subject matter and complicated syntax. As with Pound, looking up the references didn't always help. There were still gaps in the meaning, doubts over what the poems were really saying, and questions over the 'unearned magnificence' of the language.

Perhaps a third only of the poems in the first collection were really successful, and there were difficulties even in these when the meaning was pressed too far. In the most attractive *Merlin,* for example:

I will consider the outnumbering dead:
for they are the husks of what was rich seed.
Now, should they come together to be fed,
they would outstrip the locusts' covering tide.

The last line could be read as something like 'they would outstrip the numbers that make up the monstrous plagues of locusts, with their devastating famines.' But why then should they 'come together to be fed', except perhaps as a play on opposites (husks, rich, fed, famines) or to meet the rhyme needs? And how is this rather Biblical expression of

the countless dead consistent with the Morte D'Arthur terminology of the second verse?

Arthur, Elaine, Mordred, they are all gone
Among the raftered galleries of bone.
By the long barrows of Logres they are made one,
and over their city stands the pinnacled corn.

Long barrows date to the 4th or 5th fourth millennia BC, but 'Logres' refers to England on the eve of the Anglo-Saxons invasion, i.e. 5th century AD. Yes, Anglo Saxon notables were buried individually in mounds, tumuli or short barrows, but these are not the raftered long barrows, which were larger and continually reopened to take new sets of bones or bodies. Hill's language is beautiful, with striking phrases ('raftered bone', 'pinnacled corn') but the general meaning — that Arthur and others are as equally interred beneath the earth as are the inhabitants of long barrows —, i.e. all are made one by death — has fallen victim to condensed expression. A small point — and ignored by the poem's many commentators — but important if Hill is really pushing language in more telling directions. If novelists have to get their settings right, shouldn't poets?

The next poem in the *For the Unfallen* collection also starts with a striking phrase:

The starched, unbending candles stir

but is followed by something of let-down, again for (para)rhyme needs:

As though a wind had caught their hair.

Ditto the couplet following:

As though the surging of a host
Had charged the air of Pentecost.

And, if we expect words to be also chosen for what they mean, and not merely for magnificence of phrasing, we have to ask if flames can be 'starched' (i.e. stiff) and if hosts 'surge'?

Hill's answer to this famed 'difficulty' was to argue his approach did two things. It liberated words from facile or coercive approximations of current meaning, and it displayed honesty of doubt in avoiding closure and/or punning on words with contradictory associations. That is a common Postmodernist belief, but I suspect the truth was that Hill simply failed to close the circle of his thoughts, a danger apparent to anyone writing in this style.

Moreover, for whatever reason, the difficulty distanced the reader. To emphasize the deceptive nature of history, or our understanding of it, Hill often meditated on violent episodes of the political or religious past, where the poems highlighted the conflict between religious freedom and

authority, between illicit and sanctified power, beauty and brute pain. The poems were also shaped to contrast novelty with custom, and originating poetic impulse with confining form. Yet what was the poet saying with this undoubted skill? And why were the commonplaces of the historical record, something every student of history understands, continually so emphasized with oxymoron and contradictory puns? {5}

The later work was looser, flatter, more playful, esoteric in allusion and diction, often fragmentary, arbitrary and evading simple meaning: the difficulties remained or even increased, but the lines had lost much of their former magnificence.

Early Poetry

In *For the Unfallen* (1959) and the sonnet sequence of *King Log* (1968), the poems were not plentiful, but were distinctively his, {6} quite unlike the UK poetry of the time, which A. Alvarez stigmatized as genteel and parochial. Equally unlike 'The Movement' poets, Hill was much drawn to ethical dilemmas and to themes of language, responsibility and authority. {3} In detail the poems could be rather knotted in meaning, and ferociously expressed, {5} but were always redeemed by beauty of language. Indeed the poems were notable for four aspects: their savage and resonating imagery, an emphatic phrasing that was new to British poetry, extensive use of ‘white space’ (i.e. silences which added their own patterning to the verse), and a complicated syntax.

Graphic Imagery

Each of the personifications is fierce but apt on reflection in *Funeral Music*: {7}

Psalteries whine through the empyrean. Fire
Flares in the pit, ghosting upon stone
Creatures of such rampant state, vacuous
Ceremony of possession, restless
Habitation, no man's dwelling-place.

Psalteries whine through the empyrean. Fire / Flares in the pit, ghosting upon stone. But the imagery could be also simple, mundane and exact.

In Memory of Jane Fraser: {8}

She kept the siege. And every day
We watched her brooding over death
Like a strong bird above its prey.
The room filled with the kettle's breath.

Damp curtains glued against the pane
Sealed time away. Her body froze
As if to freeze us all, and chain
Creation to a stunned repose.

Phrasing

The gift of phrasing developed rapidly. In Genesis, {9} the first in his Selected Poems, the rhythm was mellifluously smooth, perhaps mockingly so in the third line:

By blood we live, the hot, the cold
To ravage and redeem the world:
There is no bloodless myth will hold.

But content was much more spelt out with the interrupted and weighted rhythms of Funeral Music: {7}

Knowing the dead, and how some were disposed:
Subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves .

Beyond the grim pun on ‘disposed’, and the muscular, knotted articulation of sense, there was also an exquisite phrasing, with long pauses after ‘dead’, ‘some’, ‘disposed, ‘rubble’, ‘water’ and ‘graves’. The same skill was evident in: {7}

For whom the possessed sea littered, on both shores,
Ruinous arms; being fired, and for good,
To sound the constitution of just wars,
Men, in their eloquent fashion, understood

White Space

That phrasing continued into the syllables themselves: the

meter was adjusted to reinforce the sense. Note how the words are picked over in the knowing cliché of the third line of September Song, {10} like a horse stepping over difficult ground:

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
you were not. Not forgotten
or passed over at the proper time.

Complicated Syntax

Themes in Hill's poems were not always developed logically, and in *Funeral Music*, (3) {7} for example, there were several voices, {11} difficult to untangle entirely, but perhaps as tagged below:

They bespoke doomsday and they meant it by
God, a their curved metal rimming the low ridge.
But few appearances are like this. b Once
Every five hundred years a comet’s
Over-riding stillness might reveal men
In such array, livid and featureless,
With England crouched beastwise beneath it all. c
‘Oh, that old northern business …’ d A field
After battle utters its own sound
Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth. e
Blindly the questing snail, vulnerable
Mole emerge, f blindly we lie down, blindly
Among carnage the most delicate souls

Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping ‘Jesus’. g

Nonetheless, some poems in the *King Log* collection were simple, magnificent and successful. The first poem in Funeral Music starts with: {7}

Nonetheless, some poems in the King Log collection were simple, magnificent and successful. The first poem in *Funeral Music* starts with: {7}

Processionals in the exemplary cave,
Benediction of shadows. Pomfret. London.
The voice fragrant with mannered humility,
With an equable contempt for this world,

Mercian Hymns

Mercian Hymns is a sequence of thirty prose poems where fragments of the poet’s childhood memories are seen against the accomplishments of Offa, an eighth-century ruler who extended his rule to all England south of the Humber. Many parallels are drawn, between a twentieth-century working-class boy and an astute Saxon king, between the body and the body politic, between the high and low styles, between the literary and the vernacular. As Neil Corcoran remarks: {12} ‘The result is a . . . poetry of compacted interruption, in which a word is barely uttered before it is modified, cancelled, undermined. This is Hill’s painful art of vocation and revocation, that art of critical juxtaposition in which mythical allusion, journalistic reportage, word-

slippage, bad pun and self-conscious pastiche cross, collide, co-habit and interbreed.’

So it is, but not successfully, I'd have thought. There are certainly attractive passages:

'The sword is in the king’s hands; the crux a craftsman’s triumph. Metal effusing its own fragrance, a variety of balm. And other miracles, other exchanges.' (MH, XVI)

But there is also much to question in the meaning of these lines, and the verset ends in complex allusions that remain enigmatic:

‘Indulgences of bartered acclaim; an expenditure, a hissing. Wine, urine and ashes.’

Why ‘indulgences’ and in what sense is the acclaim ‘bartered’? I hesitate to call the style an affection of learning, but critics {13} have not teased out any depth of meaning in Mercian Hymns, beyond vague parallels and unsupported conceits.

Perhaps the difficulties speak of fundamental problems. Prose poems are difficult in English, and Hill doesn’t succeed in imparting a unifying rhythm, even generally to individual versets. Hill’s childhood memories, prosaic and private, are not developed into a moving account that draws in the reader by imaginative sympathy. There is no obvious

connection between a boy’s thoughts and the information scattered throughout the poem. The erudition is rather suspect, moreover, i.e. seems closer to ‘name dropping’ than illuminating. Critics {13} have been driven to expound on the hermetic and alchemical traditions, on medieval life, to suppose Offa remains a presiding figure over the English Midlands, that Celtic mythology is preserved in Hill’s use of etymology of words, {14} that a king’s statesmanship is echoed in the poet’s deliberation, that word-play (‘rex’ and ‘res’, etc.) thicken the substantive meaning of the poem, and many other excellences deriving from their own cleverness. On:

'It is autumn. Chestnut boughs clash their inflamed leaves. The garden festers for attention: telluric cultures enriched with shards, corms, nodules, the sunk solids of gravity. I have raked up a golden and stinking blaze.' (Hymn XII)

Vincent Sherry remarks, {13} ‘Along these lines, the heavy alliteration and assonance coalesce the solids of poetic magic.’ but they work only we don't enquire into what the passage means too much. It sputters along but doesn't quite come off — not simply because it's an unconvincing mixture of over-emphatic description (clash, inflamed, festers, stinking) and the academic (telluric cultures) — but more because it doesn't have anything really to say, beyond idiosyncratic description.

Tenebrae

In *Tenebrae* Hill returned to his earlier occupations with strict form and artifice, but now exploring the dimensions of profane and transcendental experience, in love and in the more mundane matters of history. The volume marked the turning point of Hill's powers, from their zenith {15} to their waning into the more prosaic poetry of his later years. The best poems still saw that scrupulous attention to craft:

They slew by night
upon the road
Medina's pride
Olmedo's flower

shadows warned him
not to go
not to go
along the road, {16}

but the themes and stanza forms were now more varied. Hill's line were highly effective when compressed:{17}

Requite this angel whose
flushed and thirsting face
stoops to the sacrifice
out of which it arose.
This is the lord Eros
of grief who pities
no one; it is
Lazarus with his sores.

But less so when padded out, with rhyme too much leading the sense, as in this tour de force. {17}

And you, who with your soft but searching voice
drew me out of the sleep where I was lost,
who held me near your heart that I might rest
confiding in the darkness of your choice:
possessed by you I chose to have no choice,
fulfilled in you I sought no further quest.
You keep me, now, in dread that quenches trust,
in desolation where my sins rejoice.
As I am passionate so you with pain
turn my desire; as you seem passionless
so I recoil from all that I would gain,
wounding myself upon forgetfulness,
false ecstasies, which you in truth sustain
as you sustain each item of your cross.

The following is a better-crafted sonnet, but with oxymoron overworked, indeed becoming a mannerism (miniatures, indifferent, bankrupt, abiding): {18}

Make miniatures of the once-monstrous theme:
the red-coat devotees, melees of wheels,
Jagannath’s lovers. With indifferent aim
unleash the rutting cannon at the walls
of forts and palaces; pollute the wells.
Impound the memoirs for their bankrupt shame,

fantasies of true destiny that kills
‘under the sanction of the English name’.
Be moved by faith, obedience without fault,
the flawless hubris of heroic guilt,
the grace of visitation; and be stirred
by all her god-quests, her idolatries,
in conclave of abiding injuries,
sated upon the stillness of the bride.

British rule in India has a mixed record, but was more favorably viewed when this was written than is probably the case now: it coped particularly badly with repeated famines, and is seen (perhaps too much so by Indian historians) as wholly exploitative. Hill touches on these themes, but only obliquely. Are we looking in this poem (one of three) at the British attempt to 'civilize' India, or the horrors of the Indian Mutiny? Is that beautiful last line alluding to rape or consensual sex? It's difficult to know, and while that difficulty is a favorite theme of Hill's, the 'complicated syntax' noted above has now become a tendency to list rather than integrate observations. To an older generation at least, poetry was required not only to pose alternative views, but combine them in some aesthetically pleasing way.

The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy

After Mercian Hymns — popular with those who dislike Hill's esoteric interests — *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* is the most accessible of Geoffrey Hill’s work. {19-20} Its 100 quatrains explore the life of Charles Péguy (1873-1914), not as biography but as evidence for

something important to Hill: a poet's responsibilities to his age. Did Péguy's fervent nationalism betray his socialist ideals and so hasten France's calamitous entry into the First World War? When, after Péguy denounced the opposition, Jean Jaurès was shot by a mindless assassin in a Paris café on the eve of war, there disappeared the last hope of socialist solidarity preventing the slide into wholesale carnage, which not only ended the old world order but much of the French traditions that Péguy loved. Indeed Charles Péguy's celebratory strain of poetry was much admired in its time, and even now is worth reading if we can cope with its incandescent Catholicism, often bitter polemics and intimidating length. His famous Eve (1911) that starts:

Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour la terre
charnelle
Mais pourvu que ce fût une juste guerre.

The poem (`Happy are those who die for the carnal earth/ but only if it be for a just war' is the translation) runs to 7,643 lines. {21} No one writes with such ringing certainty today, not after a century of increasingly doubtful and murderous conflicts, and Hill's tone is quieter, more questioning and indeed querulous at times, as his opening stanza indicates:

Crack of a starting-pistol. Jean Jaurès
dies in a wine-puddle. Who or what stares
through the café-window crêped in powder-smoke?

The bill for the new farce reads ‘Sleepers Awake’.

The poem’s theme is announced in the fourth quatrain:

Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite
the assassin? Must men stand by what they write,

The aabb, abab or abba rhyme or pararhyme scheme was handled competently, but was often too loose to give an aesthetic shape to the quatrains: the content was boxed in, but not given the frisson of inevitability that exact rhyme creates. Most lines were adequate, however, and a few excellent:

How studiously
one cultivates the sugars of decay,

Three sides of a courtyard where the bees thrum
in the crimped hedges and the pigeons flirt
and paddle, and the sunlight pieces the heart-

shaped shutter patterns in the afternoon.
And the slow chain that cranks out of the well
morning and evening.

Happy are they who, under the gaze of God,
die for the ‘terre charnelle’, marry her blood
to theirs, and, in strange Christian hope, go down
into the darkness of resurrection,

into sap, ragwort, melancholy thistle,
almondy meadow-sweat,

Indeed a sprinkling of lines had the miraculous quality that was to largely disappear after this poem, when medication for depression {22} seems to have made Hill a happier man but a less acute and perfection-driven writer:

Vistas of richness and reward. The cedar
uprears its lawns of black cirrus.
Down in the river-garden a grey-gold
dawnlight begins to silhouette the ash.

But more than competence is needed to make so long a poem continuously rewarding. Often Hill is challenging Péguy on his own ground, and these vignettes of turn-of-the century rural life, which Péguy cast as hymns to an unchanging France, had in Hill's hands a more matter-of-fact air:

Good governors and captains, by your leave,
you also were sore-wounded but those wars
are ended. Iron men who ring the hours,
marshals of porte-cochère and carriage drive.

Occasionally, very occasionally, we get the entirely satisfying:

Rage and regret are tireless to explain
the stratagems of the out-maneuvered man.

If only there were more of such lines, or Hill had compressed and cut more, but artificial targets, here of 100 stanzas, tends to favor shape over urgency.

Later Poetry

The bulk of Hill's poetry belongs to this second phase: *Canaan, The Triumph of Love, Speech! Speech!, The Orchards of Syon, Scenes from Comus, A Treatise of Civil Power, Without Title, Oraclau | Oracles, Clavics, Odi Barbare*. Reception was mixed, {23-24} with some critics admitting than they often couldn't understand more than its general drift. Worth noting are three aspects: verse competence, range of reference, and tone.

Verse Competence

The poetry had generally lost that miraculous melding of sense with verse craft, and was often simply flat:

The men hefting
their accoutrements
of webbed tin, many
in bandages
With cigarettes;
with scuffed hands aflare,
as though exhaustion
drew them to life;

(Churchill’s Funeral: Canaan) {25}

Range of Reference

Whatever may be meant by moral landscape,
it is for me increasingly a terrain
seen in cross-section: igneous, sedimentary,
conglomerate, metamorphic rock-
strata, in which particular grace,
individual love, decency, endurance,
are traceable across the faults. {26}

It’s a stretch to imagine human qualities as groupings of rock types (in which conglomerates do not fit, incidentally: conglomerates are a type not grouping of sedimentary rock: and only sedimentary rocks generally have strata or layers: why won't poets check technical usage?), and continuity across faults is in fact more easily seen on the surface than pictured in cross section. The last three lines are certainly effective, indeed compelling, but only if we don't visualize the conceit of ‘faults’ too much.

The later poems drew on a much wider range of material. The Speech! Speech! collection, for example, has references to Colonel Fjuyi and the Nigerian–Biafran civil war, the Battle of Jutland, Augustine’s City of God, Bucer’s De Regno Christi, Dürer, Charles Ives, and Saki. Some references reappeared from earlier works: from Tenebrae with Gustave

Holst; from Canaan with Winston Churchill and the Kreisau circle that led the plot against Hitler; from The Triumph of Love, with Bletchley Park and the wartime cryptanalysts, Nobel laureates, and forensic oratory. {27}

Hill made great demands on his readers, often on unpopular themes. 'In Hill, the roles of poet, teacher, and prophet are indistinguishably mingled. One suspects that much of the baffled hostility to his work is rooted less in its apparent difficulty than in disdain for Hill's embattled Christianity, his taking old-fashioned questions seriously. He is an unapologetically religious poet in an irreligious age.' {28}
But even in the more accomplished sections there were the same thoughts flashing out as insights but not returning to a carefully thought-out and consolidating position.
Offertorium: December 2002: {28}

For rain-sprigged yew trees, blockish as they guard
admonitory sparse berries, atrorubent
stone holt of darkness, no, of claustral light:
for late distortions lodged by first mistakes;
for all departing, as our selves, from time;
for random justice held with things half-known,
with restitution if things come to that.

What does 'for late distortions lodged by first mistakes' mean? That matters are made irredeemably so by our early mistakes? What are the mistakes lodged in — our lives? In what sense do yews guard their dark red berries, or the

tombstones are then cloistered light? What do these and other insights cohere into? Each of these lines would grow into a satisfying poem if opened out into the comprehensible, but here they are tossed out in a show of verbal brilliance but only fitful sense. The difficulties continued in later collection, {29-31} with a wide mix of social registers and allusions sufficient to dumbfound the most devoted of readers. Civic poetry must make sense to the general reader, and Hill's generally does not. {32}

Tone

There was also more personal reminiscence in Hill's later poems, but the balance was not always easy, with the poet sometimes turning on his readers, as here in *The Triumph of Love XCVIII* {26}

You see also
how this man's creepy, though not creeping wit —
he fancies himself a token Jew by marriage,
a Jew by token marriage — has buzzed, droned,
round a half-dozen topics (fewer surely?)
for almost fifty years.

Hyperbole

Hill's use of oxymoron, which allowed him to use the historical record but note its doubtful veracity, the traps it sets the unwary reader, has been examined in detail by critics, {3-4} but the rhetoric of hyperbole is even more obvious. It was present from the beginning. Genesis: {33}

Against the burly air I strode,
Where the tight ocean heaves its load,
Crying the miracles of God.

No doubt Keats had said ‘I think poetry should surprise by a fine excess’ but he added ‘and not by singularity’. Whence comes Hill’s pugilistic imagery, however, this continual over-energizing to make matter emphatic, brutal or obstructive to man’s purposes? Do we simply believe in the ‘magical transcendence of art’, or should we question the ‘glamorous rhetoric and grand style’? {34} We can talk about degree and proportion, and note that, while horror is never far from Hill's lines, its constant emphasis, albeit scrupulously controlled, has the usual function of hyperbole, which is to flagrantly display itself, creating suspicion and forcing us to see beyond the stated facts. {35} But what are the facts here? Anyone who knows Plantagenet England (portrayed in *Funeral Music*) can imagine the barbarities behind the historian’s mild summary, ‘the insurrection was savagely repressed’, and surmise how matters were dressed up for contemporary audiences, but what larger meaning is being insisted on? The many distortions in the historical record? That truism is hardly a theme for poetry unless the distortions also have a larger or personal dimension. Hill had extraordinary gifts, but they seem to have been increasingly diverted into the byways of academic thought.

Modernism and Aesthetics

Hill's philosophical reading was selective. One can argue, of course, that words, being fallible or even deceptive, will compromise anything we read, even the most closely argued philosophic text. Or say that aesthetics is irrelevant to contemporary poetry, which has its own ways of thinking. But not to read philosophy at all makes us intellectual children, where the blind will gladly lead the blind. Why not make the journey in another, more appropriate medium, and then return to compare those insights with what the poetic impulse suggests?

We would then know if Hill became a deconstructionist in his later work, playfully exaggerating the difficulties of language by employing a language that continually undercuts itself in meaning and authority. More importantly, we would know the strengths and weaknesses of such Modernist views. Hill's later poems seem to have been written quickly, no longer to exacting forms, without that acute ear for magniloquent and resonant phrasing. Much is versified prose. In this piece we seem to have wandered into a history seminar: {36}

> One could say that Hobbes (of Malmesbury), whom I
> would call the last great
> projector of Europe prior to Hudson
> (Hudson the Railway King) is radical
> as we are déracinés; granted that Leviathan
> towers on basics rather than from roots;
> and that roots itself, unhappily, is now

a gnostic sign among the Corinthians.

Some meaning can usually be construed in his poems, at least in parts, but Hill often seemed not to care whether he was being understood, or being taken seriously. He made a virtue of his personal oddities and unfashionable beliefs, ranting against his political or literary antagonists in very plebian tones. Was this the medication for depression talking, or did Hill come to think that very few of his contemporaries, or perhaps he alone, could do justice to his insights: a self-aggrandizing paranoia? Like the Modernists in general and Robert Lowell in particular, with whom he had many affinities, Hill's earlier work was the best.

When the world is facing so many problems — poverty, inequality, climate change, depleting resources, the threat of nuclear war — there also seems something unreal and irresponsible in poets and academics being wholly absorbed in abstruse theoretical problems of their own making. And self-imposed these misunderstandings generally are, as I hope the section that follows will show. {37} Long though it is, this section is only the briefest summary of what philosophy will accept as meaning.

Modernism and Theories of Meaning

Logical Positivism

Philosophers have been much exercised in saying something helpful and non-circular about meaning. An early attack on the problem was made by the Logical Positivists. Either, they

said, sentences are statements of fact, when they can be verified. Or they are analytical, resting in the meaning of words and the structures that contain them. All other sentences — i.e. metaphysical, aesthetic and ethical statements — are only appeals to emotion, and therefore devoid of intellectual content. Logical Positivists supposed that language had simple structures and that the facts they held were largely independent of that language. They supposed that matters which inspired the greatest reverence in individuals and which united communities could be dismissed as meaningless. And they supposed that verification, for which mathematics and science were the admired paradigms, amounted to no more than reference to straightforward, immediately-given sense data. None of these is true, and the approach was not pursued much after the 1960s.

Linguistic Philosophy

Logical Positivism had nonetheless done good work in clearing away the tangle of philosophic argument. Perhaps more could be done? The later Wittgenstein argued that the purpose of philosophy was to clarify issues, to see through the bewitchment of language, to demonstrate that many conundrums of meaning arose through words being used beyond their proper remit. In short, rather than immerse ourselves in abstruse theory, we should study language as it is actually used, by everyday people in everyday situations. Philosophy should not be the final arbiter on use, but more

the humble investigator. Much had to be given up, but the gain is the roles words are now seen to play: subtle, not to be pinned down or rigidly elaborated. Games, for example, do not possess one common feature, but only a plexus of overlapping similarities. {37}

What happened to such a modest program? It was not modest at all, but proved on investigation to ramify into further difficulties, which only increased with greater depth of investigation. Gilbert Ryle and J.L. Austin were among many creating what came to be called linguistic philosophy. But clarification did not arrive, only a gradual realization that the problems of philosophy, meaning included, remained on the far side of linguistic analysis. {37}

Meaning as Propositional Calculus

Suppose we broaden its scope a little, but still require that meaning be as simple and transportable as possible. We can break a sentence into simple units (propositions) that conform to a simple assertions of fact. And we can remove the context: the who, why, how, etc. of its application. The result will assuredly be simplistic, but the sentences will rest on assured foundations and can be built in logically correct ways. The matter is often put in terms of two concepts: intension and extension. Intension is the meaning achieved by the words in the sentence. Extension is what the sentence refers to. In ‘The moon is a planet’, intension is whatever defines planets, and extension is what is referred

to by the sentence, i.e. the moon. The extension is therefore the state of affairs to which the sentence refers, and the intension is that which allows us to pick out the extension of the sentence in all possible worlds. The approach derives from Gottlob Frege who founded modern logic. Simple sentences are built of propositions connected by logical constants like ‘not and or’, and ‘and’ and ‘if – then’. More complex sentences arise when ‘there exist’, ‘some’,’ supposing’, ‘all’ are employed. But the meaning is brought out by the logic of the connectives and the truth values of the propositions — i.e. what needs to be the case for the proposition to be true. {37}

There are many advantages in this approach: clarity, certainty, universality. Once expressions are reduced to propositions with truth values, it becomes harder to dally with relativism. Truth and falsity are universals, and apply across the different worlds of individuals, cultures and times. But matters are a good deal less clear-cut when metalanguages and different logics are involved. And, even without such complications, there is Quine's objection that translation is underdetermined, that we inevitably make assumptions in translating from one language to another which must undermine any claim that truth is universal. There is Hacking's objection that style of reasoning is important, there being no one true, fundamental language in which reasoning should be conducted. And there is the question whether such a logic properly represents meaning. Are all sentences assertions of fact, and do we always intend

to be so logical? More damaging still is the observation that language is not the self-evident and unmetaphoric entity that propositional calculus assumes. Arguments are commonly not matters of fact but rhetoric. And finally there are the facts themselves. Even in science, the most objective of disciplines, facts are not matters immediately given but arrived at through a communality of practice and assumption. {37}

Intention-Based Semantics

Perhaps we should start from another direction altogether and ask why human beings use speech. What are their purposes and intentions? J.L. Austin's How to Do Things with Words was the seminal work, and his approach was extended and systematized by John Searle and others. Meaning is real and includes both what the speaker intended and what he actually said — i.e. the function of a sentence and its internal structure. Speech, moreover, is rule-governed, and we should be able to spell out these rules. Paul Grice concerned himself with differences in intention between the said and the meant, and in analyzing conversational situations. Implication was conveyed by general knowledge and shared interest. And an action intended to induce belief would have to a. induce that belief, b. be recognized as such by the hearers, and c. be performed with every intention of being recognized as such. His cooperative principle introduced maxims of quality (things are not said which are known to be false or for which

there is no evidence), quantity (appropriately informative), relation (relevant), and manner (brief, orderly, not obscure or ambiguous). Intention-based semantic theories are still popular and are actively pursued. But they have not entirely succeeded in reducing meaning and psychology to actions and utterances. If meaning is defined as acting so as to induce belief and action in another, theories of meaning must be grounded in non-semantic terms to avoid circularity. And there is some doubt whether this can be done. Individuals act according to beliefs, and the communication of these beliefs eventually and necessarily calls on public beliefs and language. {37}

Meaning as Truth Conditions

Is there another way of cutting through the tangle of belief and language-dependence? One very influential program was that of John Davidson, which made the meaning of the sentence simply its truth conditions. The meaning of a trivially simple example: 'The moon is round' are the conditions that the sentence is true, namely that the moon is indeed round. No more than that. The program sidesteps troublesome philosophical issues — the mind-body problem, problems of knowledge, deep grammar, social usage — to state 'facts' in a logically-transparent language. {37}

But is this really what is meant by meaning? Philosophers have not generally thought so, still less linguists, sociologists, and literary critics. And, even by its own lights,

the program was unsuccessful. Its logical consistency was weakened by the need for two assumptions — that translation from natural to logical metalanguages was never with mishap, and that meaning was a holistic phenomenon, i.e. that texts as a whole bestowed meaning on individual words rather than the other way about. Moreover, and despite employing the powerful resources of symbolic logic, the program proved unable to deal with many everyday expressions or sentences. {37}

Deconstruction

Since all attempts to ground meaning in more fundamental entities have failed, perhaps we should conclude that sentences have no meaning at all, no final, settled meaning that we can paraphrase in non-metaphorical language. That was the contention of Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction is the literary programmer that derives from this approach, though Derrida himself did not see deconstruction as a method, and still less an attack on the western canon of literature, but more a way of investigating the textural contexts in which words are used. The social, cultural and historical aspects of that context, and how we interpret a text from our own current perspective, are the concerns of hermeneutics. Derrida's view went deeper. There is no ‘thought’ as such, he argued, one that we create in our minds and then clothe with words. Words are the beginning and the end of the matter, the only reality. They refer only to other words, not to things — be they ‘thoughts’ in the mind, or ‘objects’ in the

world. By looking carefully at a text we see where the writer has chosen one word in preference to others of similar meaning, and these choices tell us something about what the writer is trying not to say, i.e. is suppressing or hiding from us — either deliberately, or by thoughtless immersion in the suppositions of his time. In this sense, texts write themselves. Context and author are largely irrelevant. And not only texts. Institutions, traditions, beliefs and practices: none of these have definable meanings and determinable missions. All dissolve into words, whose deployment it is the philosopher's task to investigate. {37}

Who believes this? Very few in the workaday world. Deconstructionists do not expect word games played with their salary cheques, or even their students' essays. As a philosophic position, deconstruction can be defended by making certain assumptions — that words predate thought, are beyond our control, and do not make reference. But the cost is very high. Studies of brain operation do not support this position. Also jettisoned are investigations into the linguistic development of language, the social purposes it serves, its aesthetic aspects. Political injustices — which Derrida cared passionately about — are only personal views, mere words at last. Derrida was a subtle and learned writer, vastly more accomplished than the majority of his followers, but deconstruction severs language from its larger responsibilities. {37}

Reference

And do words make only reference to themselves? Ultimately they make sense of our thoughts, our emotions, our sense impressions. We register something as loud, heavy, yellow, pungent, etc. and no amount of word shuffling can set these impressions aside. We expect objects to retain their properties, just as words retain their meaning, the two being locked together and finally cohering in a world we understand. No one supposes that words do not mediate in the way we use our senses, and that complex chains of understanding do not underlie the simple statement ‘that is a chair’. Or the power of ideology to evoke violent reactions to concepts that are not experienced and may be largely abstract: ‘communist’, ‘terrorist’, etc. But the culprit is the tangled chain of reference, the spurious associations and the procedural sleights of hand that demagogues employ. {37}

Certainly we can declare: ‘Aha! See, words always enter into things.’ But that is the source of their power and properties. Words cannot generally be entirely divorced from context, any more than things can be handled at any length without words. Yet even this power of language can be exaggerated. Many skills are learnt by watching and doing. Painters learn from each other's paintings, not from the clever words of art critics. Musicians discussing a tricky bit of interpretation will demonstrate what they mean. In all of these cases the verbal explanation comes belatedly, and is accepted to the extent it expresses what has already been intuitively grasped. Literary critics, philosophers and academics

naturally exalt the power of language, but many things in this world run perfectly well on a very slender vocabulary indeed — as driving a car, house-building, and lovemaking amply demonstrate. {37}

Be that as it may, reference is clearly an essential part of linguistic philosophy, and the literature is extensive. One popular approach, deriving from Wittgenstein and developed by Peter Strawson and John Searle, is to establish name and reference by a cluster of descriptions. Unfortunately, however, references may be borrowed without being properly understood, and names may not require descriptions: the Cataline Plot is simply what Cicero denounced and thwarted. A second approach developed by Saul Kripke is therefore gaining ground. Naming is introduced by dubbing (ostensively, i.e. by pointing). People not present at the dubbing pick up the word, and others use it. This theory of designating chains (d-chains as they are called) has several advantages. The chains are independent of their first use and of those who use them, and they allow name substitution. Identity is speaker-based. We accept the linguistic and non- linguistic contexts, but understand that the speakers' associations forge the link between language and the world. And speakers can be precise, unclear, ambiguous and/or plain wrong. D-chains can designate things meaningless and false, as well as things meaningful and true. {37}

Gareth Evans looked at how change of reference is possible.

Sometimes we muddle up the references and then have to ground names in another way. Sometimes we can use names knowing next to nothing about their meaning, but realizing nonetheless that the category still has to be right — nouns used as nouns, 'lakes' used in geographical and not psychological description. But what happens when we move to more abstract terms? Then matters become much more contentious, several workers arguing for reference fixing and reference fixing theories. {37}

Hermeneutics

Do we have to understand the cultural aspects of reference? Undoubtedly, say the hermeneutists. There is no final, unchanging, ahistorical basis for interpretation. Language is not neutral, but needs to be understood through certain filters — the continuance of the historical past for Gadamer, through labor and shared expression for Habemas, and through cultural artifacts and shared ways of understanding for Ricouer. We live on our historical inheritance, says Gadamer, in a dialogue between the old traditions and present needs. And there is no simple way to assess that inheritance except by trial and error: praxis, living out its precepts and their possible reshaping. Rationality of the scientific or propositional kind is something we should be wary of, since it evades any direct apperception of reality, the ‘truth that finds us’. Validity comes from a communality of practice and purposes, not by reference to abstract theory. Habermas was a Marxist and criticized the

‘rationality’ of science as too much placing control in the hands of specialists, an undemocratic procedure. Man is entitled to his freedoms — from material want, from social exclusion, and from practices that alienate him from better nature. Labor is not simply a component of production, but how men are forced to live. Class ideologies that reduce liberties in this way are perversions of language, which we need to exhume and examine. Cultural objects are shared ways in which a community understands itself. But communities change. How we arrive at a proper interpretation of objects from past civilizations is something, says the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, that Gadamer does not explain. All things are relative: no one interpretation is to be preferred over another. Habermas is more concerned with method, but has also failed to bring praxis and theory together — i.e. is far from achieving Husserl's hope for a rigorous science. Ricoeur's own suggestion is to search the text itself for the complex relationship between explaining and understanding. {37}

Relativism in Social Context

Societies have very different customs, particularly those of native peoples isolated by history and terrain from contact with others. Anthropologists have found much that is puzzling in their myths and social practices. Some tribes claim a close kinship with the animal world, even to the extent of believing themselves to be red parakeets, etc. So the notion arose that the ‘primitive’ mind was somehow

different from its western counterpart, a notion strengthened when it was found that some native languages attribute gender to inanimate objects, or have no past or future tense. Much of this can be discounted. Though their language may not have a past tense as such, Hopi Indians have no difficulty working to western timetables. 'Cerveza' is feminine in gender, but not otherwise regarded as female. Native peoples live too close to extinction for them to indulge in mystifying beliefs, and no doubt anthropologists would impute primitivism to a Roman Catholic mass. Indeed, later investigations showed that red parakeets were being used metaphorically, or partly so. {37}

But are languages (and hence meanings) culture-dependent? We can translate between different languages, but is what comes over an adequate transcription? In one sense the answer must be ‘yes’. It remains a possibility that a native speech will one day be found expressing concepts so entirely foreign to us that translation is impossible. But none of the 4,000-plus languages has yet done so. Many examples of the native's ‘irrational mind’ prove to be misunderstandings, or words used in a non-literal way. All the same, in another sense perhaps, the answer may be ‘no’. Polyglots can switch languages easily, but the switch is into a paraphrase rather than a word-for-word transcription. What is given in translation is a guide to a different linguistic terrain, to a world recognized slightly differently. So with jargon and styles within a particular language. Vocabularies change, and so do syntax and metaphor. Human beings

create models of cognition that reflect concepts developed in the interaction between brain, body and environment. Such models, called schema, may provide our five different conceptual approaches — images, metaphors, part for whole, propositional and symbolic. Linguistic functions are propositional and symbolic. Grammatical constructions are idealized schemas. And so on. Much remains to be done, not least to convince the many specializations involved, but language is not the unambiguous, neutral medium that literalists have supposed. {37}

Religious Meaning

What is the meaning that religious adherents derive from their faith? Certainly it seems compelling, even if not communicable to those who have not experienced that reality. Wishful thinking, hallucination? No. It is not possible to prove them to be false or logically incoherent. Theism is rational within a given conceptual system, such systems being judged on their match with the evidence, on their explanatory or transforming power, on their consistency, coherence, simplicity, elegance and fertility, and on the rules that arise out of the system rather than a-priori. Religion can be seen as the sacralization of identity, which presupposes order and consistency in our views of reality. It becomes meaningful in acts: ritual, prayer, mystical encounters. As in myth, the language of religion is closed and self-supporting, not easily translated or transferred from one culture to another. Meaning is formed by acts of

communication and has to be recreated in those acts time and again. It is always possible to reduce religion to anthropology or social science, but such explanations are ultimately unsatisfying, lacking the emotion-laden demonstration of a man's place in a meaningful world. {37}

Conclusions

Semiotics is still an obsession of literary theory, but clearly only one of many approaches to meaning, and may indeed be fading now from the American philosophy scene. Very few of its ten thousand professional philosophers are rattling the bars of the prison cage of language. Linguistic philosophies continue, but in addition to the traditional fields — philosophy of existence (ontology), meaning (epistemology) art (aesthetics), morals (ethics) and political history — there is increased emphasis on new fields: computer issues, applied ethics, feminism, rights of parenthood, etc. Though most philosophy is still written by academics for other academics, an applied philosophy is being attempted, even if its impact on public opinion is still very small. {37}

A great deal of this is relevant to poetry, though largely unknown to poetry readers and writers. Reference, meta-languages and even prepositional logic could help us avoid extreme positions, that poetry was only ‘emotionally’ true (New Criticism), that poetry has its own language (Modernism) and that words only refer to other words

(Postmodernism).

Philosophy strives for generality, to establish what can't be refuted, so that what is true in one instance is true in all instances. By those criteria, Modernism is found wanting, as is the critical theory that has grown up to protect it. There are difficulties with philosophy, as there are in all disciplines. There are also limits to what reasoning can achieve, clearly important in aesthetics, which contains an emotional element. We can make a poem's content something special that only poetry creates, therefore, but we can't call it meaning in the broadly accepted way. With poetry we can illustrate, personify, enhance, embody, enlarge and deepen meanings — and no doubt a dozen other things — but we cannot, per se, create meaning, not if those meanings are to have currency in the wider world, or be what we need to communicate with fellow human beings. For the deceits in language, which contemporary poetry insists on pursuing, there is little warrant. Language fails as most thing fail when pushed too far. Words used in an idiosyncratic manner entirely will not appeal to the educated common reader, nor make sense to fellow poets — which is surely the situation illustrated by contemporary reviewing: no proper analysis of what is being said, no assessment as to whether the attitudes and assumptions are acceptable or believable, no comment on the enterprise as a whole.

Modernism and Geoffrey Hill

The above was a whistle-stop tour of meaning — elementary, but all that philosophy will accept as meaning.

That being the case, how can poets still claim a vatic role, a privileged access to words and their larger meanings? All that is left is the private — quasi religious {38} — world that Modernist poets create, but clearly one that won't serve for public utterances. To be art in the older and wider sense, their creations must exhibit the features that have always made art. To have meaning, they must obey the rules and understandings that make words meaningful, i.e. their socially purposes. Poems that do not fulfil these requirements — and many poems today refuse allegiance — may not be honest and forward-looking so much as wrong-headed and misconceived.

It is, of course, possible to talk of an aesthetic understanding that is quite distinct from meaning in a philosophic sense. Art, for example, represents reality in a special way, clearly so with music. Art can be seen as emotion objectified in symbolic form: a philosophy developed by Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) and Susanne Langer (1895-1985). Cassirer extended Kant's a priori categories so as to represent language, myth, art, religion and science as systems of symbolic forms. These forms are mental shaping of experience. They are culturally determined and are created by us. But they also and wholly constitute our world: all ‘reality’ is a reality seen and understood through them. Outside lies Kant's noumenal world, about which there is nothing we can really say. {39} These systems of symbolic form are not arbitrary creations, but have grown up to answer human needs. Each system

carries its own particular enlightenment.

Langer ranged over the whole field of artistic expression, though is best known for her theories of music. Art has its own meaning or meanings. Even in our simplest observations we transform a manifold of sensations into a virtual world of general symbols: a world with a grammar of its own, guiding our ear and eyes, highly articulated in art. In music we have a symbolic expression about feelings. Music has a logic of its own, expressing the forms of human feeling, and creating an inner lives. Certainly music does not denote as logic must, but it conveys knowledge directly, 'by acquaintance' rather than 'knowledge about'. Feelings are therefore symbolically objectified in certain forms, with a detail and truth that language cannot approach. {40}

In this we move from philosophy of language to aesthetics, where the requirements are just as onerous. One requirement of art (music excepted) is representation, faithful representation, which excludes gerrymandering with language.

As did Yeats and Pound, Hill requires us to accept matters on his terms, as the poet discovers or can envisage the world. Unlike Pound, however, Hill also adds the scholarly references, or hints of them. It is from this inward-looking tangle, or varied of layers of reference, that Hill makes his later poems, sometimes expressing the exterior world through them, sometimes leaving them as an academic

discourse. Hill's term is 'sensuous intelligence'. {38} But where the academic article demonstrates the author's mastery of the subject (and hence our need to take it seriously) with a detailed examination of sources, Hill can simply post travel notes on his intellectual or spiritual wanderings. Whether the journey will have significance for the common reader must (by its very method of proceeding) be open to doubt.

How Geoffrey Hill composed, I don't know, but suspect it was through the resounding phrase, which is a dangerous way of proceeding if the results are not continuously returned to the intelligible. Dangerous because it's the rarest of gifts and so likely to fail or be unavailable in the 'dry' periods most writers experience. Dangerous because the approach can give collages of phrases that don't entirely fit together, a feature seen in many of Hill's poems, in all periods. And dangerous, finally, because the poet is tempted to take refuge in the mesmerizing effects of phrases, rather than discover what he means by thinking through the varied means at his disposal. The larger tragedy is not, however, that Hill overworked Modernism's fetish with language to end up writing unnecessarily complex poems, but that he didn't use his acute critical powers to look beyond what is philosophically confused. Today's poets need to read in the wider aspects of thought because multiple (and often disjointed) reference does not give meaning as such, only a long penumbra of understandings, and, on occasion, misunderstandings.

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Poetry and Personality: Philip Larkin

British to his suburban core, Philip Larkin graduated from Oxford with a first in English language and literature, and became a professional librarian at various institutions, moving finally to Hull University, where he oversaw important innovations. He wrote two novels, did some book reviewing, contributed jazz criticism to The Daily Telegraph and edited the Oxford English Book of Twentieth Century Verse, which appeared in 1973 and went through many reprintings. His social life was circumspect and desultory: his love life even more so. The *North Ship collection* (1945) shows the influence of Yeats, but the collections that made his name are *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). All were well received, and indeed remain popular, though the last in particular shows a marked falling off in quality. Larkin declined the position of Poet Laureate, and died of cancer a year later, in 1985. {1}

Larkin's Reputation

Larkin had wide appeal, but his reputation among fellow practitioners was somewhat mixed. Andrew Motion noted 'a very English, glum accuracy', about emotions, places, and relationships. Donald Davie called it the work of 'lowered sights and diminished expectations'. Jean Hartley spoke of a 'piquant mixture of lyricism and discontent'. {1} McClatchy thought Larkin wrote ‘in clipped, lucid stanzas, about the

failures and remorse of age, about stunted lives and spoiled desires.’ Alan Brownjohn however noted that Larkin had produced without fanfare 'the most technically brilliant and resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable, body of verse of any English poet in the last twenty-five years.' {2}

Philip Larkin’s reputation in fact {2} rests on an extraordinary thin base, on three small collections, in which were many duds. Setting aside work in the first collection, *The North Ship*, Larkin’s poetry accurately depicted an England recovering from WWII, with a lugubrious matter-of-factness and a dour, somewhat defeatist, not-to-be-kidded attitude. Unlike much verse of the time and since, however, Larkin’s poems also evoked an exact time and place, the only English rival in this regard being John Betjeman, who was equally popular, probably more so with the general reader who does not much care for poetry, especially of the modern sort.

The Whitsun Weddings

Larkin’s first collection, *The Less Deceived* of 1955 may have the best poems. Of the 32 poems in the subsequent The Whitsun Weddings collection of 1964, only 10 were really successful: Here, Mr. Bleaney, Love Songs in Age, Home is so Sad, Toads Revisited, The Whitsun Weddings, Days, Ambulances, Dockery and Son, and An Arundel Tomb. The verse in others can be hardly verse at all.

Wild Oats:

Parting, after about five
Rehearsals, was an agreement
That I was too selfish, withdrawn,
And easily bored to love.
Well, useful to get that learnt.
In my wallet are still two snaps
Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on.
Unlucky charms, perhaps.

At first blush, the poem is depressing and infuriating: stress verse with three or four beats to the line, and lackadaisical rhymes (five/love, withdrawn/on, agreement/learnt, snaps/perhaps). But those spasmodic and unsatisfactory lines also underline the content, which is apparently autobiographical, though unrelieved by the humor of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, which draws on the same material. {1} Much of the famed English sense of humor is self-deprecating, and an individual buoyant in a post-war Britain of rationing and lost dreams of empire would be an odd soul indeed. Larkin was often grouped with The Movement Poets, moreover, who aimed for a popular, down-to-earth style. {3}

Larkin's Money

Money is not among his best work, but does lead us into Larkin's art. The first and last stanzas of the poem are: {4}

Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:
'Why do you let me lie here wastefully?

I am all you never had of goods and sex.
You could get them still by writing a few cheques.'
I listen to money singing. It's like looking down
From long French windows at a provincial town,
The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

We have to admit the obvious: the earlier stanza is doggerel. The aabb rhyme scheme does not give stanza integrity, but handles easily enough. Larkin's lumpiness is easily removed:

Money is sometimes like our looking down
From long French windows on some provincial town,
On slums, canal, the churches, ornate and mad:
Sun bright at evening, but immensely sad.
But for the better? Compare the two renderings.

The 'I listen' and 'It’s like' of Larkin's poke through the meter, and bring us up short. The amended version is smoother, but has missed something.

Larkin used a hybrid style between verse and prose, sometimes putting commonplace thoughts in commonplace language, and then slipping into an iambic verse for more serious reflections. Here are the first and last stanzas of one of his best-known poems: {5}

From *Church Going*

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.
A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

The opening lines can be read:
Once I am sure | there's nothing going on
I step inside || letting the door thud shut.

But the stresses are not clearly marked, the speech rhythms imposing something more like:
Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside | letting the door thud shut.

Making its very ordinariness seem sincerity:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on, I step inside, letting the door thud shut. Another church: matting, seats, and stone and little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut for Sunday, brownish now. Some brass and stuff up at the holy end; the small neat organ; and a tense, musty, unignorable silence, brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off my cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

Ordinary prose, or almost so, since awkward reverence is preparing us for the third stanza, which starts:

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,

And by the final stanza the language is much more elevated —
blent, robed in destinies, hunger in himself, gravitating. . . ground, . wise in, dead lie round — and the assiduous student of rhetoric could identify: {6}

Parenthesis: he once heard
Parallelism: In whose blent air all our compulsions meet
Anaphora : A serious house on serious earth
Anadiplosis: to be more serious
Procatalepsis: Are recognized
Litotes: proper to grow wise in
Metabasis: And that much never can be obsolete

Amplification: Since someone will forever . .
Metanoia: If only that so many dead lie round
Metaphor: robed as destinies.
Personification: A hunger in himself to be more serious
Hyperbaton: earth it is
Pleonasm: gravitating with it to this ground
Alliteration: And gravitating with it to this ground
Parataxis: If only that so many dead lie round.
Climax: If only that so many dead lie round

From an everyday beginning — though with some rhetoric {7} — the poem moves to studied exactness, the more striking because of the 'artless' flatlands from which it rises. Only they're not artless, but a conscious strategy.

The concluding stanza of the previous poem mentions money singing, adds some bald observations, and ends with 'It is intensely sad'. Nothing has really prepared us for 'I listen to money singing': it hasn't in the speaker's life, and doesn't in the decaying landscape around, unless heartlessly so on the lack of investment. Where *Church Going* rose to the memorable, this poem bites the matter off with It is intensely sad, which echoes the singing, and relates back to a repressed life. A climax in reverse, deepened by the banality of the language and metrical expression.

Much of this must seem ancient history. Academia has paid its tributes and moved on. Larkin was writing fifty years ago, about an England now very different, conflicted by issues

that were hardly spoken of then — immigration, inequality, loss of national identity, Britain's relationship to Europe. But Larkin depicted a world that the great mass of people could identify with, an essential ingredient of the tabloid press, but one that arguably still needs addressing if poetry is to recapture its public.

Larkin's approach may be still illuminating, therefore. He compiled *The Oxford English Book of Twentieth Century Verse*, partly with the hope of finding poets overlooked by the success of Modernism, but was apparently disappointed. {1} His own work was a mixture of the sophisticated and the faux-naïf, a feature also of The Movement group in which he was often placed.

Church Going was a popular poem, much anthologized and written about. Why didn't Larkin write more in this manner? The only comparable poem in later collections was *The Whitsun Weddings*, but the piece, though including acute social observation, and exactly pitched in tone, was much more colloquial and throw-away, ending in the vaguely regenerative 'A sense of falling, like an arrow –shower / Sent out of sight, becoming rain.' The serious reflection is not otherwise pursued, each poem generally ending with a rueful shrug of disappointment or bewilderment: 'I don't know' (Mr Bleaney), Nothing to be said (*Nothing To Be Said*), 'and could not now' (*Love Songs in Age*), 'and then the only end of age' (*Dockery and Son*).

A collection of thirty-odd poems appearing every decade or so, with many of the poems rather slight and unambitious, is hardly the output of an adventurous spirit. What was it — intellectual isolation, provincialism, mother-fixation, or Larkin's noted reserve and misogyny? No doubt all these {8} but more perhaps the unrewarding nature of British poetry, that increasingly (in the schoolmaster's phrase) 'gave no trouble and took none.' Larkin's carefully nursed sense of defeat, which admirably captured the mood of post-war Britain, became in the end too self-defining, and, in the British context, too self-indulgent. Reviewers and critics should have expected more. Even now, I would suggest, we should not take the greatness of the poetry as a given {9} but look more closely at the work, poem by poem. Even that celebrated line in *Deceptions* — 'All the unhurried day / Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives' — may not be answering properly to the situation, to the outrage and shame felt by the traumatized victim.

Larkin the man played its part in these shortcomings, I suggest, and the less attractive aspects of his character became more evident in his later poems. Readers of his biographies should not have been surprised by loutish attitudes: they are present even in these *The Whitsun Weddings* samples:

My contact and my pal (Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses)

A snivel on the violins (Broadcast)
An uncle shouting smut, and then the perms (The Whitsun Weddings)
Books are a load of crap (A Study of Reading Habits)
A tuberous cock and balls (Sunny Prestatyn)
A bosomly English rose (Wild Oats)
And the boy puking his heart out in the Gents (Essential Beauty)

This wasn't the poet cocking a snoot at genteel society, but simply being himself, exhibiting the absence of what was once expected of poetry: an elevation in thought, the intimations of a larger world.

The strength of Larkin's appeal lay therefore in his poetry's suburban compass. It spoke to the ordinary, no-nonsense, law-abiding citizen who did an honest nine to five job, read the Sunday papers and gave to worthwhile causes, but who was otherwise untouched by the great British traditions and religious practices. As often happens, decade by decade, when academia comes to justify the reigning literary stars, critics dutifully read a lot of accomplishment into the contrived pieces that make up *High Windows*, though a proper poem needs more than bewildered stare into the blue beyond with which the title poem ends, the 'And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.' {10}

That academia could run to over-cleverness, as in *Sympathy*

in White Major.{11} Yet Larkin was never a Symbolist, not in the proper sense of the word. ‘Closed like confessionals’ is an apt beginning for *Ambulances*, but the similarity is not developed beyond the obvious. The earlier *Deceptions* is an excellent poem — in its exact imagery, sense of lived experience and disturbing undertones — but the lack of sexual fulfilment that ends the poem rather misses the point. Sexual gratification was hardly what the rapist was seeking but female subjugation, an example of the horrific social and economic abuse that Mayhew documented in his 1861 London Labour and the London Poor, and which Larkin, on the periphery of academic life in Hull, chose to ignore.

Indeed, having made his reputation with *The Less Deceived*, and justifiably so, Larkin seems then to have somewhat gloried in that grumpy persona, poking fun at any earnest and high-minded themes as youthful hopes settled into middle-aged disappointments. Anything approaching exuberance is damped down, by flattening the verse and biting the matter off with a banal phrase. From the first, Larkin’s poems exhibited a sense of effort, suggesting that the apt and telling imagery was hard-won, extracted by the intellect, and increasingly felt not to be worth the effort.

All around were larger issues, injustices even, which seem not to have been sensed by Larkin, an omission that grows with the years. It was all very well to point up middle-class pretensions in *The Whitsun Weddings*, but where is the humanity that takes each adventuring couple and blesses

their setting out? The wretched social divisions of British life are not an adequate defense. Classes were much more rigidly defined in nineteenth-century Russia, for example, but anyone who reads their authors will recognize the humanity missing from the British scene, in novels {12-13} and the arts generally.{14} Larkin did not aspire to the elevated, and increasingly seemed unable to resist the opportunity to knock pretense down a peg of two, though without having a substitute.

The last was the essential problem, as it is with Modernism generally: the poets lack a tradition to explore, deepen and clarify, but must make up their material, and respond to it, as they go along. Larkin was an honest reporter in a lack-luster period of British social history where poetry, unfortunately, needs much richer ground. The early poem *Church Going* showed what he had in him, but reviewers and critics, perhaps because relieved to find a serious poet who was also popular, were no more conducive of good work than were ordinary readers, whose philistine nature and small hopes Larkin came increasingly to represent.

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Serious Postmodernism: The Poetry of Prynne and Ashbery

J.H. Prynne

J. H. Prynne is a private figure, publishing quietly until recently in the more out-of-the-way small presses. Born in 1936, Prynne pursued an academic career, becoming a lecturer at Cambridge University, and then librarian at Gonville and Caius College. He is still apt to be passed over in surveys of English poetry, though his is one of the few names respected on both sides of the Atlantic. Many of England's more thoughtful poets acknowledge their debt to his scrupulous Postmodernism, and Peter Ackroyd recently described him as 'without doubt the most formidable and accomplished poet in England today.' {1}
Jeremy Prynne's poems were initially conventional. Routledge published his first collection, *Force of Circumstance,* in 1962, but these poems were quickly superseded by Prynne's avant garde concerns, and have not been republished. Three collections appeared in 1968, followed by *The White Stones* in 1969, probably the best known and acclaimed of his works. Collections were brought out every few years thereafter by various small publishers, the bulky *Poems* {2} being published by Bloodaxe in 1999. A few reviews, scattered Introductions, and books by Reeve and Kerridge {3} and by Josh Stanley are almost the sum total of the Prynne bibliography. Why the interest?

Because Prynne's work is often seen as exemplifying key

aspects of Postmodernism. The poems are not personal expressions in the conventional sense, but areas of discourse, cleared by the implied narrator, where items of observation, contextual thought and quotation briefly appear. They do not ‘close’ — i.e. lead to any conclusion — but seem carefully phrased if rather casual jottings, arbitrary at first. The poems employ an exceptionally wide vocabulary, some of it technical, occasionally geological. Postmodernism often features an overabundance of information, but Prynne's is much more limited, though unfocused on conventional subjects. Some of Julia Kristeva's observations can be applied to Prynne's work, but Kristeva's work is rooted in the dubious ground of Freudian and Lacanian psychology. Some of Lyotard and Habermas's concepts also apply — notably their views of pluralist and fragmented societies, and the public space of lifeworlds. In Prynne's work, the heteroglossia of Bakhtin can also be extended to poetry — against its author's intentions — but the value of the concept lies in the illumination it supplies to a work in question, and Prynne's poetry works differently.

On the Matter of Thermal Packing

Because *On the Matter of Thermal Packing i*s one of the few Prynne poems available on the Internet, and so readily accessible, I will attempt a brief analysis here.

Prynne supplies the scientific references that could help us understand his *The White Stones*, but I do not know what the ‘thermal packing’ refers to, unless it be the self-reinforcing heat losses and climatic changes that controlled

the repeated spread and retreat of ice sheets over Britain during the Pleistocene period, events which profoundly affected the British landscape, and thus the lives and languages of its inhabitants. Prynne's poems have received their scholarly explications, but these are sometimes as baffling as the original poetry, reading a good deal more into the words than seems justified. {1-4}

A rough synopsis of the poem from *The White Stones* {5} would be this: We are looking back, imagining (in the days of time now) the Pleistocene period (the meltwater constantly round my feet), how magnificent the ice sheets looked (the ice is glory to the past and the eloquence) which the world has suffered to occur (the gentility of the world's being). We know this through scientific study (competence) but the glare would have been overwhelming (the start is buried in light). Even usual things like grass and shrubs would have been bound into the last advance of the ice (last war). That ice was like a skating rink we remember (a low drywall, formal steps) and skating indeed became a passion in New England. This last was still a genteel world, however, and those thin sheets of ice (so fragile, so beautifully shallow in the past) were not unlike the frost-stiffened moral rectitude of the English (strictly English localism of moral candor). Let us imagine them skating (borne over the top, skimming) though we don't have names (I too never knew who had lived there). Let me think back to a difficult period in the last war (we were out of the bombs) and there was widespread interruption of school studies (the Golden

Fleece) and transport (bus time-table). But we got by ("It is difficult to say precisely what constitutes a habitable country") and now we have the nuclear threat, which permeates our skull, much as the ice encased (so ice-encased like resin) that world, which was normal, but more various than we might imagine, cloudy at times.

Water is preferentially and asymmetrically bonded together as ice, though it had its own wealth and stability. I loved that frozen world I remember from childhood, which I didn't entirely understand (the gentle reach of ignorance), just as we don't understand how the ice structure retains its orientation in the frost heaving left in the topsoil afterwards ("one critical axis of the crystal structure of ice remains dominant after the melt"). Those frozen things in regaining their original form released some elemental (nuclear) thought that there is an inherent rightness in things, which are exposed to the elements (air plays on its crown) but also have religious connotations (the prince of life) and commercial connections (its patent, its price). I can picture the sunlight gently lying on the snow-laden fields, when the actuality (glitter) of the war is now released, and I can hear the guns for the first time. Or maybe I only think so, but certainly the reality (eloquence) of melt waters is real to me. I could trust the ice to hold, and trust man's scientific ability (some modest & gentle competence), so that I'd be content to go on living a little more.

I've side-stepped a few tangles, but it's not a difficult poem.

Is it interesting? Up to a point. There is a gift for unusual and sometimes exact phrasing, but the associations are somewhat predictable, and I'd much prefer to be reading the geological papers originating the poems. They might bring the period to life in the way Prynne's poem does not, a period brimming, moreover, with problems of evidence, interpretation, climatic cycles and various technical matters which I won't go into here. By contrast, Prynne's poem seems a peg on which to hang various observations, some pleasing, some very neatly expressed, and some perhaps only present through the ingenuity of commentators. But poetry has become a different animal after Wallace Steven's pioneering approaches. Here an extended exercise in stray thoughts has been given a very poised and accomplished Postmodernist gloss.

Prynne's Later Work

Prynne later work loses some of its gift for evocative phrasing, and becomes more matter-of-fact and physical. The poems look dispassionately on the visceral human being and the way it responds to stimuli. That seems a very technical attitude to poetry, but Prynne is not concerned with meta-narratives. The grand themes of life do not interest him, or at least not their truth as such. He evokes the inconsequentiality of existence: the thoughts, observations and associations that pass across the space created by the individual poem. The result may be disorientating and ungrounded — there are no unbiased

observations, no pure sense-impressions of the type supposed by philosophers of the British analytical tradition — but the process is intriguing, as though one were watching an alien world through a microscope. Very different elements are juxtaposed without any sense of incongruity:

Pretty sleep lips; the carrots need thinning,
pork chops are up again. We sail and play
as clouds go on the day trip... (*High Pink on Chrome*: 1975)

Opacities appear, and odd trains of thought, but the best poems provide a strange sense of completeness, which resists summary. Often baffling, not always successful, not satisfying to the general reader of poetry, the poems nonetheless convey a quiet sense of authority:

The children rise and fall as they
watch, they burn in the sun's coronal
display... (*Acquisition of Love* in *The White Stones*: 1969)

After feints the heart steadies,
pointwise invariant, by the drown'd
light of her fire... (*Into the Day:* 1972)

Now these hurt visitors submit,
learning in the brilliant retinue
to be helpless by refusal... (*Lend a Hand in Bands Around the Throat:* 1987)

Prynne was closely associated with Edward Dorn, and in fact accompanied the Dorns on their 1965 journey over from the States to Ed's teaching job in East Anglia. {7} Dorn was a co-founder of the *Black Mountain School of Poetry*, which held that the breath rhythm is continuous with the deep organic nature of man. But whatever the truth of that (and it certainly allowed its exponents to develop a very exact phrasing in their free verse forms) Prynne and Dorn were both interested in the actual process of poetic composition. Olson and Dorn advocated open forms — not only the line endings appearing where the reader naturally took breath, but care being taken to ensure that the disparate elements of the poem (its ‘field’) were not forced into a linear consistency or predictability. Estrangement, an oblique choice of words, avoidance of a fixed or final interpretation, puns, and a wider subject matter: these are the elements from which Prynne's poetry is built.

Why should this interest us — if indeed it does, and we are not falling into the usual circular argument: (Prynne is a dedicated and formidably intelligent man. Other poets have praised his work. His poems must therefore be good, and — if we can’t always find obvious meanings — must have deep things to say. We are entitled to show it every indulgence in divining depths and shadows of meaning that we would not search for in other poems.) The problems, as I see them, lie in three areas: in the local and sometimes private nature of Prynne’s observations, the substitution of ‘the poetic imagination’ for facts, and in the championing of the poet’s

word-play over a practical understanding of how the mind works in organizing vision.

We look for some generality in a poem, or in any work of art. We expect that what applies to the author also applies to other sentient beings, but is expressed more cogently, memorably or beautifully than in the raw experience, or as expressed by non-artists. Prynne contests this view, and makes novelty his deciding factor, even denying the term of poet to Donald Davie. {6} The Postmodernist approach is therefore a rather ingenious one of evasion. Instead of finding the telling or illuminating word or phrase, which entails some skill and effort, the Postmodernist can simply have repeated runs at the matter, using the near misses as hopping-off points for yet more tangential remarks or observations. The poems then verge on those academic papers that exist to parade the erudition and originality of their authors rather than convey something deeply felt and worth imparting. Prynne's language is much more deft and pleasing, of course, and open up unusual flights of imagination or conjecture, but we are still coerced into privileging one person's intellectual odyssey.

The second difficulty is as I've mentioned above: what would make an engrossing article in National Geographic and the like becomes a solipsist, incomplete and somewhat arbitrary layman's account. The poem doesn't lead us into another and more fascinating world, or heighten that world with emotive and significant detail, but takes tangential pop-

shots at the mental, religious and/or philosophical aspects involved.

In fact, neither Prynne nor Postmodernists in general seem to have any interest in how the eye actually obtains its visual sense impressions. Nor in how the mind organizes those impressions. Unfortunately, that makes even the mundane Wikipedia-type article {7-9} far more interesting than the private musings of language specialists. The scientific method has its own in-built assumptions, of course, {21} but not having much to say cannot be made good by extended name-dropping. {4}

If that sounds too cavalier a dismissal, readers should note that Keery's treatment of *The White Stones*, in the opening introduction to one of seven poems considered (*In the Stone a New Name Written*), enlists Revelation 2:17, Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens, Corinthians 2:3-4, Hölderlin, Hebrew, Psalm 105, Wordsworth, Marlowe, Shakespeare, W.S. Graham, Blake, Yeats, Tennyson, Auden, and de Kooning without quite pinning the matter down, i.e. deciding what the 'white' refers to (just as Prynne's poetry doesn't exhibit closure, i.e. pin matters down). This first section ends with: 'In a later section of this study, I shall consider both "the qualified Freudian optimism", in its original psychological and philosophical contexts, and Jung's conception of psychic individuation, to which Bloom's is indebted.'

Isn't this a little overdone? Such excesses, which mimic the poetry itself in putting erudition above explanation, have only helped to undermine the standing of English Literature departments. Criticism gradually killed its host. Additionally, as we have noted with the founders of Modernism, and will with John Ashbery below, Prynne's later poetry has seen a falling off in quality. The genuine poetic impulse, that continually practiced innocence with which all poetry has to be written, was no doubt stifled by the usual burdens of academic life, but also perhaps by the need to be always moving on. The later poetry became more indoctrinated with theories that had no basis in rationality, but were perhaps the more firmly grasped for that reason, because they promised greater riches on unvisited and yet more nebulous shores.

The difficulties of Prynne's approach, and particularly with the later work that resists full explication, is not news. {22} Critical articles became self-standing structures only loosely anchored to the poem or poems in question, and also exhibited many of the features of Postmodernist poems themselves: extreme foregrounding, tenuous linkages, and opacities of meaning. The essays are often astutely argued, calling on wide gifts and sympathetic reading, but cannot be easily summarized. Or put another way: their meaning is the semantic journey or journeys readers must take in coming to terms with these articles: it is not detachable. {23}

John Ashbery

The contrast with Prynne could hardly be more striking. John Ashbery is an international celebrity for whom large claims are made, familiar through countless references to a public that generally takes little interest in contemporary writing. Ashbery does not write about experiences, real or imagined, but portrays inner trains of thought. {10-13} The mental excursions have no particular reference to the exterior world, though they do employ its language in various ways, sometimes playfully, sometimes with a deadpan solemnity. Complex patterns of mimicry, observation and rumination appear and disappear across a space created by the poet for no particular reason. Why read them? Because the poems can be extraordinarily entertaining. At their best, the lines have astonishing charm and freshness — seem exactly what a very gifted poet would begin his creations with. But the inventions are not pursued. Abruptly as they appear they are deflated, evaded, developed in unexpected ways:

The thieves are not breaking in, the castle was not being stormed.
It was the holiness of the day that fed our notions
And released them, sly breath of Eros.
(*Sunrise in Suburbia in The Double Dream of Spring:* 1970)

Many poets would give their eye-teeth to have written that second line, which is then happily tossed away. The meaning is problematic, and even more so in the poem's concluding lines that immediately follow:

Anniversary on the woven city lament, that assures our arriving
In the hours, second, breath, watching our salary
In the morning holocaust become one vast furnace,
engaging all tears.

Some association of ideas is apparent — sunrise: furnace: holocaust: lament — but Ashbery seems more often content to win approval by literary wizardry:

...this moment of hope
In all its mature, matronly form ... innocent and monstrous
As the ocean's bright display of teeth

Is this Zen Buddhism, Surrealism, a playful Dadaism? There are many such influences. Nor are the phrases always empty of content:

the loveliest feelings must soon find words, and these, yes,
Displace them The winter does what it can for children

John Ashbery was born in 1927, studied at Harvard and Columbia, went as a Fulbright scholar to France in 1955 and stayed ten years, supplying art criticism to the *Herald Tribune* and *Art News*. Continually writing poetry, he returned to the US on the death of his father, and in his 1970 volume *The Double Dream of Spring* developed his disarmingly fluent and discursive style. Always there was experimentation, however, and every few years saw a new

departure. The *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) was straightforward reflection, but the *As We Know* of 1979 began with 70 pages of lines set out with double columns, which readers were invited to combine as they pleased, no 'correct reading' being possible. Like Wallace Stevens, whose work he admires, Ashbery accepts that we cannot know reality at first hand. But whereas Stevens was content with interpretations of reality that were credible for their time — 'fictions' he called them — Ashbery has speeded up the process. Imagination destroys its fictions as quickly as it creates them. Yet if reality is incoherent or unknowable, a work of art nonetheless requires some form: how do we avoid making that form inauthentic?

Ashbery's solution is to create a continual expectation of form that is then frustrated or dissolved away. Life can only be flux, multiplicity and contradictions. Why should we despair at that? Perhaps we are emotionally or morally adrift, but life can be interesting all the same, indeed intellectually exhilarating. All that's required is to be honest to the fundamental human condition. Such is Ashbery's view, which his work continually expresses. But his ways of deploying that insight are very varied. He muddles up syntax and grammar. He reverses expectations in mid-sentence. He constructs collages of contemporary conversation and journalism, not to parody their limitations but to remind us of the multiplicities of 'reality'. His metaphors turn into something else as we read. The long poems wind towards a climax, and abruptly turn into flatter

ground. While the pyrotechnics continue we are charmed and satisfied, and it comes almost as a churlish reflection to realize that such a willful misreading of everyday expectations would not survive a moment's operation in the larger world outside.

Why all the fuss? Why not let Postmodernists pursue their games while the general reader gets back to more rewarding stuff? Yes, but what stuff? Postmodernism is now the style winning the reviews, the commissions and appointments. Between its costive excellences and the cliché-ridden banalities of amateur work (say the material that appears so copiously on www.poetry.com or www.netpoetry.com) there is a gap filled by poems that too often seems merely workmanlike. Postmodernist work is astute and restricted; amateur work is unlettered, heartfelt and popular. Neither appeals to the other side very much, and literary scholars often stay clear of both.

So arise many features of the poetry scene. One is the warfare between the poetry schools, with their continual rewriting of the apostolic succession from Modernism's founding fathers. Another is the striking absence of proper argument and reference in literary theory: these studies are written as Postmodernist poems, intentionally fragmentary and hermetic. Older critics are missing the point to complain of specious scholarship, and perhaps are even deluding themselves. Postmodernists appreciate what the critics ignore: that language is treacherous, self-referencing and

arbitrary. And that is true whether the language is of public utterance, science or of everyday affairs.

Critique of Theory

What does a non-partisan make of this? English Literature classes have lost much of their kudos, and it is not from long-suffering taxpayers but other academics that exasperation is making itself felt. Postmodernists do not read widely enough. Their ignorance of history, mathematics, science, linguistics and philosophy, where the insoluble conundrums of Postmodernist language have been known for generations — not solved entirely, but understood, accommodated, worked with — is truly astonishing, as is their misapplication of scientific terminology in their poems. Can their stance be genuine? Postmodernists expect medical treatment like anyone else, with their medical records correctly filled in. They do not countenance deconstructive sleights of hand applied to their terms of appointment or salary cheques, or indeed in their students' essays. But poets are not in the business of turning out excellent human beings, merely of writing poems. If deprived of a proper role in contemporary society, that does not mean they should forego the benefits of that society, to which they contribute as best they can. Poetry is arguably an apprenticeship in awareness, and it's inevitable that frank speaking will be unpopular. These and a dozen other arguments can be advanced for the arts to continue the policy of biting the hand that feeds them, but the situation is certainly curious.

One popular explanation runs as follows. Poets are charged with providing a deeper insight into our fundamental human needs and realities. Once Kant had shown that reality itself was unknowable by rational thought, poets were obliged to find irrational routes to their spiritual powers. The Romantics drew their inspiration from Nature, which they attempted to harmonize with their mental and emotional intuitions. But as the nineteenth century wore on, and poets became more city-dwellers, that Nature began to show a darker side. Poverty, overcrowding and child exploitation by the new industrial society disclosed the shabby heart of the common man, and any special place in God's creation was undermined by the findings of geology and evolution. Ignored by society, poets began championing the aristocratic virtues of good form, irony and indifference to popular culture. A spiritual birthright had to be self-generated, made the sharper by opposition to the lumpenproletariat around them. The great art of the past could still be a yardstick, but it was a yardstick appropriated and interpreted by other rules. Art did not represent reality, but created an independent reality given vitality and authenticity by its internal structure.

What couldn't be contained by such devices was not suppressed, but purposely offered as a feature. A bric-a-brac of images, broken syntax and abstruse reveries gave readers a simulacrum of the strangeness of real life. What Modernism crafted metaphorically in art forms, Surrealism and Dada took realistically. Theirs was an assault on the

hypocrisies of bourgeois society and so, indirectly, on the ideals of high Modernism. The new movements realized that the disconnected but undeniably powerful images of the unconscious could be re-invoked in hallucinatory collages of the everyday. And because dreams were beyond the dreamer's control, so these literary collages would escape the limited intentions or even understandings of their authors. World War Two brought an end to such experiments, and the poetry that followed seemed chastened if not spiritually impoverished. What unbridled imagination could achieve was all too evident in Stalin's social engineering, Nazi concentration camps and the widespread atrocities of war. Convention returned, and the New Criticism favored Eliot and Yeats over Pound, Stevens and Williams.

But the ferment of the interwar years had not been forgotten, and many of its approaches and ideas spoke to a generation that felt stifled or marginalized by an academic art scene. Onto the clean, flat canvases of abstract expressionism were thrown an amazing variety of social comment, parody and technical experiments. Radical American poetry upturned the structural economy and self-ennobling ideals of Modernism and built a platform on which anything could be performed. Confessions, demotic rant, cracker-barrel wisdom — the new poetry gloried in its freedom from good taste and social responsibility. After the Vietnam War, when the arts again realigned themselves with traditional cultural values, poetry dug deeper to find an

intellectual framework for its opposition to officialdom. It espoused the teachings of the New Left, and took Derrida, Baudrillard and Lyotard as its champions.

The demanding, often elitist poetry of Modernism was superseded by a Postmodernist parody, not now to serve a deeper vision but to show that deeper visions were impossible. The gates to proper appreciation were still guarded by an intellectual aristocracy, but this was now an intelligentsia of reviewers, editors and lecturers in the younger universities. Audacious originality and not skill became the hallmark of art. But the movement was not simply escaping the restraints of Modernism; it was pursuing its own logic. Artists could no longer claim a heroic independence as their very materials — words, images and content were complicit with a capitalist world. That was obviously the case for the work to be understood and accepted. After a century of effort, philosophers had not found a logically transparent language, and Derrida repeatedly demonstrated the mutual interdependence of words. Baudrillard analyzed the information basis of our modern economies, and Lyotard stressed that the artist cannot by genius reveal hidden universals, as such universals do not exist. The media was our world, and with its terms and materials any art had now to be built.

Postmodernism came as a breath of fresh air. It had many strengths — a protean and egalitarian nature, appeal to the young and disadvantaged, opportunities for columnists and

academics. The difficulties arise when the arguments are examined in detail. Whatever theory might suppose, language does not wholly constrain our thought. A compromised language could not sustain the astonishingly wide range of scholarship today, in and outside academia. Nor could scientists debate rival theories. Or commerce and industry survive where figures and strategies need continually to be evaluated. The basic postulate of Postmodernism is false because truth does not lie with narrow argument from propositions, but with what people in a pluralist society actually say and do. Postmodernism's besetting sin is hubris. Like medieval scholasticism, it has convinced itself through argument from supposed authorities that certain things cannot be true, and will not go out into the world to check. Often the generalizations do not hold water, but are continually and retrospectively rewritten. Artists at any time are commonly unconscious of belonging to any movement, which makes a guiding principle of irrationality difficult to see and perhaps suspect. And no doubt science could be blamed for a loss in spiritual faith in the nineteenth century, though the attack came on theology, not religion. But perhaps Postmodernists should extend their reading. Brain functioning, cell metabolism, complexity and self-organization — in these areas science has left reductionism far behind, and indeed offers vistas as awesome as anything confronting Dante seven centuries ago. {14-21}

Contemporary Poetry Characteristics

1. Iconoclasm

To many artists, Modernism had sold out. Its creations were no longer the preserve of an exclusive avant garde but the subject of academic study. Post-Impressionist paintings appeared on Christmas cards, and contemporary music featured in popular concerts. Even the originators themselves turned away from their high ideals. Pound espoused right-wing views. Eliot wrote in tight forms, became an establishment figure and received the Nobel Prize. William Carlos Williams's poems served to show freshmen how little there was to fear in poetry. By the 1960s, university courses were stressing the continuity between traditional poetry and the contemporary scene. None of this was congenial to writers suffering the usual privations of the struggling artist. The education industry seemed a sham. For all its stress on authenticity and originality, everyone knew that the literary canon could be probed but not ultimately questioned.

Of course the contemporary writer could always go one better: adopt and improve on the skills of the literary great, but this required enormous time, talent and dedication, with very doubtful chances of success. The public bought as critics directed; the critics wrote as they remembered their university courses indicating; and the courses repeated what had been written before. Very few with any influence on the livelihood of writers actually wrote poetry themselves and so could be expected to have the practitioner's eye for craft and

accomplishment. The safer approach was to reject the past, devise new styles however vacuous or wrong-headed, and then promote them as usual in a market-orientated consumer society. Most conspicuously was this done in the visual arts, but book prizes and regional festivals played their part in the literary world. And with its stress on fashion, the need to keep up to date, the advertising industry was the model to adopt. What counted was the interest swirling around the exhibition or publication, and this naturally drew on and supported contemporary events, fashions and concerns. The artworks could look somewhat arbitrary, and the public were apt to mutter that they could do as well themselves, but then the general public didn't buy paintings or poetry in any quantity.

For those who did, the wealthy industrialists and a cultured intelligentsia, two strategies were employed. The first was a variation of the game of the emperor's new clothes that Modernism had been playing for decades: the priest-like role of cultural arbiter. And the second was an attack on the cultural achievements of the past. Ours was an age of mass literacy and communications, so that the old themes and their master-servant attitudes no longer applied. The old skills were no more than slavish copying: slick, inauthentic, a cultural imperialism. The strategies worked, though at a cost. English departments, together with the humanities generally, gradually lost their prestige and then their students. Indeed, if as hermeneutists assert, art is one way in which a society understands itself, poetry must inevitably

reflect contemporary attitudes and concerns. But hermeneutists also stress the importance of tradition. Past cultural achievements represent something significant and universal about human nature, indeed must do or we should not respond to them now that their superficial attractions have been stripped away. And against the claims of Postmodernism, the lives and personalities of artists do color their work. Indeed their lives are so hard, and success so fleeting, that serious artists very much have to believe in the importance of their individual efforts. But then the promoters of Modernism are not generally artists but academics and media salesmen — as indeed most students become — so that any difference between theory and reality is yet another aspect of Postmodernism in which 'anything goes'. {21}

2. Groundlessness

Art, politics, public service, life in the great institutions — in none of these could be found any bedrock of unassailable probity. Serious shortcomings could be found in science, mathematics, linguistics, sociology and philosophy — in whatever purported to be true knowledge. All involved assumptions, cultural understandings, agreements as to what counted as important, and how that importance should be assessed. Even our language was imprecise, communal and second-hand. Where did reality stop and interpretation begin? In truth there was no essential difference between art and life: both were fictions. Was psychoanalysis a myth?

Very well, so then were science and the humanities. All were self-supporting and self-referencing variably coherent systems with truths that were not transportable.

No doubt history has some ticklish problems of interpretation, but few suppose that the holocaust never happened. Even admirers of Paul de Mann were suddenly aroused from their solipsist musings when damaging evidence was found for their hero's earlier support of Nazi ideas. No one can see how the exterior world can be unmediated by our senses and understandings, but the philosophic problems of asserting that reality is entirely created by language and intellectual concepts are formidable indeed. Science has its procedures and limitations, but its supposed ‘myths’ work in ways other myths do not. All disciplines have their own view of the world, but they are not equivalent or equally acceptable. Postmodernism largely overlooks how reality constrains actions, language and art. {21}

3. Formlessness

Whence comes this desire for autonomy, for circumscribing form, for aesthetic shape? Look clearly at art and the dissonances will appear just as prominently. The New Criticism and traditional aesthetics simply left them out of account. Deviation from the expected, foregrounding, departures from the conventional are the essence of art, as Ramon Jacobson and the Russian formalists demonstrated.

Art will be much stronger for being shapeless, indefinite, even incoherent. Nor need we stick rigidly to genres, or refrain from pastiche and parody. Art is the whole world, and the more that can be included the richer the artwork. Indeed no such essence of art was ever demonstrated. No doubt the New Critics did speak too glibly of aesthetic harmonies and tension resolution, and poems could always be read that way, given sufficient ingenuity.

Yet there are limits. The differences between a competent and an outstanding work of art may be difficult to prove to a first-year student, but everyone attests to the increasing discrimination that comes with love of the subject and prolonged study. It is a common observation that art begins in selection, and that an etching or black and white photograph may possess powers in proportion to what they exclude. If that is denied — and it is denied by Postmodernists — then many contemporary artworks will have no appeal to the more traditionally-minded, which is indeed the case. {21}

4. Populism

Postmodernism is very appealing. It is avowedly populist, and employs what is well-known and easily accessible in vivid montages. It welcomes diversity, and seeks to engage an audience directly, without levels of book learning interceding.

It encourages audience participation. It mixes genres, and so makes interesting what otherwise would be overlooked. It can illustrate social causes, but does not insist on an underlying seriousness, all matters being equally relative. But if Postmodernism espouses populism, its works do not generally have mass appeal. Response is via theories that are incomprehensible, and purposely incomprehensible, to all but a well-read elite. We may enjoy something a fifteenth century Flemish painting without understanding the religious iconography, but that is not the case with Postmodernist works. Fail to grasp the theory, and nothing is there — which explains the bewilderment and distrust of the general public. The work seems fragmentary, arbitrary, lacking in skill and overall purpose, which it unashamedly is, from older perspectives. What of the movement's larger ambitions? Are its artworks at bottom a criticism of life? No, and are not intended to be. Do they sharpen our sensibilities, make us see deeper and more clearly, make us more alive to the beauty of the world and indignant at its injustices? Certainly not. They make us more open to experience and less censorious. Postmodernism is not traditional, is indeed an anti-art in many ways, impatient of grandiose claims and intending no more sometimes than entertainment of an easily bored society. Artwork that does more is spurious, and therefore to be excluded from 'serious' consideration. {21}

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