

OCASO PRESS ARTICLES: MODERNISM

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This pdf compilation covers articles on Modernism: reassessing the movement, possible alternatives and contemporary poetry problems

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Reassessing Contemporary Poetry

Introduction: Aims of these Essays

With even Postmodernism wearing thin, it seems sensible to look again at the origins of contemporary art and literature. {1-2} What was baffling has become accepted, promoted by the mainstream media, covered by school syllabuses, and made the foundations of contemporary literature. It comes with something of a shock to realize that Modernism is now a century old, with many of its questionable assumptions accepted more than examined by the academic mill. {3-5} Modernism, for example, often supposed that: {6}

Form was imprisoning

Immediacy of composition spoke for honesty

Image and myth took precedence over prose sense

Everyday language was to be preferred, and

Open forms reflected contemporary life.

So much so, indeed, that, while older styles are still being written, they are the preserve of amateurs and magazines of limited prestige, where the poems often have a faded, jocular and apologetic air, as though real poetry was being written somewhere else. If only it were! By developing a 'modern sensibility' and outlawing its previous techniques — i.e. continually moving the goalposts — much of today's work has become poetry in name only. What it has won in status it has lost in popularity, becoming a specialist,

fragmented and coterie-bound affair. How and why this happened is the theme of these pages.

Independence

I have every admiration for nuanced literary essays, which set our thoughts on pleasant ramblings, but they are not my purpose here. In these reviews I have tried to ask the hard questions, and put my conclusions as simply and trenchantly as possible. Rather, therefore, than weave a carefully annotated net of significance and reference in work accepted by the literary canon — the common and necessary practice of academia — I have looked to see if those standings are in fact genuinely and independently merited.

The approach is that of close reading, particularly of verse technique. That means, to switch media, I shall talk more like a painter going round a local art exhibition than a curator justifying her latest acquisition. Art is a good deal more than technique, but technique is the essential foundation, what is needed to give conceptions their successful form. Accordingly, it is technique that concerns painters, and only they who know, more or less, how a painting has been approached, what skill sets deployed and how well various challenges have been met. Most academics do not write verse, or verse in the traditional, demanding sense that Modernism displaced, or claimed to have displaced, and do not therefore have the practitioners's insight. Acknowledged or unacknowledged, they also have allegiances to maintain — an accepted reputation in the inbred, closely refereed and somewhat hypersensitive world

of academia, or membership of the contemporary poetry club, whose accepted practices must be observed if publishing doors are to be kept open. In terms of verse craft, a good deal of contemporary poetry is fairly negligible, but few {7-8} probably wish to say so and leave a community that looks after its own.

No doubt in these days of crisis in the humanities, where steady, peer-reviewed publication is vital to keeping a job at all, it makes sense to run with the herd, but student and reader are nonetheless doing themselves a disservice. Contemporary poetry is suffering from what economists would call inflation, where supply vastly exceeds demand. Some styles may even be approaching hyper-inflation, where the currency becomes practically worthless. The relentless self-promotion of Modernism has drowned out common sense, and today's poetry — trivial, over-clever and/or dutifully experimental — doesn't measure up to what poetry once was. Whether the situation is a result of flaws inherent in Modernism, or socio-economic matters, or very possibly both, is a moot point, but the evidence can hardly be questioned, even in the search-engine rankings, where popularity equates with excellence. The socio-economic factors I list below. The flaws in Modernism, the thin soils on which it grew up, are examined in webpages devoted to the founders of Modernism.

Much of what seemed so revolutionary at the time now looks rather tame and contrived. Why did it receive such

attention? Because academia constantly needs fresh content, themes and theory? New styles dutifully appear in the leading poetry magazines, are reviewed, made the subject of literary articles, books, MA theses and school texts, enjoy their preeminence for a decade or two, and then sink back to become worthy specialist interests. Some were over-promoted from the first — and this includes some very big names — because the literary world works that way and indeed has to. Human beings form hierarchical societies, and in literature, no less than in the arts of war and governance, there is a need for accepted leaders and a clear chain of command. The structure saves time, gives a sense of stability, and is generally required for teaching purposes. It's simply how we function:

'A relatively small number of people make the overwhelming majority of significant cultural and economic decisions. Wars are fought, populations shift, the rules of commerce change, all without reference to what the bulk of the population thinks or wants. It isn't strange, it's the story of all human history. Very few civilizations have operated in any other way. People naturally sort themselves into hierarchies. People who have power defend it from people who don't.'

{9}

Yet it is those hierarchies I'm questioning in attempting these essays, which are written for the independent traveller, and emphatically not for the toiling masses of students hoping to improve their grades, who should quote

what everybody else quotes if they want untroubled advancement in their careers.

I wouldn't want to claim too much these essays, moreover, which are brief exercises in close reading, though they do reach disturbing conclusions. I remember, fifty years ago, hearing students of English literature confide privately that the papers they had to read on Shakespeare and other luminaries were a bit unbelievable — was Shakespeare really capable of such thoughts? — and that excess of cleverness has now extended to Modernists. Does the literary canon need to be so over-defended? Work by many of the big names can be unnecessarily obscure (Eliot), affected (Yeats), banal (Williams), pretentious (Pound), vacuous (Stevens), over-clever (Auden) or incoherent (Hill). By no means has all their work these problems, of course, they are more prevalent than we might expect. The verse craft can also be rather perfunctory, elementary or inept. Occasionally I have rewritten lines, and this 'correction' should not in fact be possible. Great poetry is written to unassailable standards, and, too often, this work seems not to be.

Regarding the unliterary style, I should explain that I worked for many years in the borderlands of scientific research, industry and commerce, where complex technical matters have to be summarized succinctly for busy executives: challenging areas where errors cost good money and are not forgiven. But also relevant, I would hope, are the many translations here from European and non-

European languages — each needing sensibility, balance and wide reading. In short, I have tried to be as clear as possible, bound only by the usual rules of fairness, courtesy and recognition that we are all creatures of individual taste and experience.

Can Poetry Matter?

Has much changed since Dana Gioia wrote his provocative essay in 1991? {10} Poetry is even more a subculture centred on colleges and universities, which preach to the converted. Serious poets talk to other serious poets, who have all been schooled in similar poetic sensibilities. Beyond that world, now under threat as cutbacks continue in the humanities, serious poetry hardly exists, let alone assumes importance. To outsiders, and no doubt to the great mass of amateurs, the poetry seems inbred, homogenized and flat, exploring matters interesting only to fellow poets. Even Angus Fletcher's prescription in 'A New Theory for American Poetry' {11} seems more of the same: something typically American, inspired by Whitman, Crane and Ashbery. Who would today claim for example: {12}

'Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree

of life.'

And it's not just contemporary poetry. In 1992, some 17% of Americans had read a work of poetry at least once in the year, but that figure had shrunk to 6.7% twenty years later. Poetry is less popular than dance, jazz or knitting. {13}

If modern poetry is a religion that outlaws all but preaching to the converting, it is also a failing one. Intellectually, it's approaching a vast ponzi scheme where those who cashed out early did well in status and readership, but where those who came after, our contemporaries, are left paying into an increasingly dubious investment. Academics, already under tenure pressure, may have good reason not to question what underlies their careers, but the common reader has larger commitments. All movements need their sacred cows and high priests, doubtless, but they also need to continually adapt and serve their communities better. We need now to think, really think, and not take on trust what officials in public and academic life continually say to us: repetition is not argument.

Current Difficulties

The circumstances in which poetry is written have a bearing on styles, themes and quality. In the main, poets now have a poor public image, and make very little money. The problems are their self-centred attitudes, suspect reviewing, commercialization of the book trade, timidity in academia, the barbarism of literary theory, and their own ceaseless production of very indifferent work.

An astonishing number of people do write poetry. Setting aside the products of creative writing classes in schools, prisons, universities and adult education centres, and the unoriginal rhymes that no doubt everyone pens in adolescent love, some hundreds of thousands of poems are sent each year to the small poetry presses. It is difficult to know how many poets are represented: ten to fifty thousand perhaps. {14} Inevitably, much is unexciting — ill-constructed, cliché-ridden, trite, self-indulgent and trivial — but even the good poems have perhaps only a one in fifty chance of being accepted. The rest are sent to more tolerant poetry ezines, or are periodically aired in poetry groups before being finally abandoned.

The reasons lie close to home. Poets are blinkered by narrow understandings and ambitions, and do not glory in each other's work. Most poetry collections are bought by family and friends of the poets concerned, by rival poets looking for slant, style and ideas, by would-be poets and by educationalists. {15} Poetry magazines are lucky to have circulations exceeding 1000, and many new ventures do not see the year out. Even the larger and long-established magazines are often displayed on bookshelves more for prestige than enthusiastic reading. Decent sales across the spectrum are essential for editors and contributors, as for the general health of poetry in the country, but contributors are often reluctant to subscribe unless subscription is clearly made a precondition of acceptance — which still doesn't

ensure that the publications are actually read and enjoyed.

Why should this be? The arts are notoriously competitive, and supply of poetry ludicrously exceeds demand. But some artists do very much support each other — not in the performing arts, admittedly, but those in the less personality-based ones of painting, illustration, pottery, etc. Here the artists genuinely admire the work they purchase, and learn from the skills displayed. Is that the answer: poetry is not widely purchased by poets because they see nothing special in it, nothing they couldn't do themselves? In the absence of rules, standards or common assumptions, and without a public to woo, poets have made sincerity their *raison d'être*, and to simple feelings everyone has an equal entitlement.

Money Matters

Professional poets earn far more from reviewing, adjudicating competitions, giving talks, running workshops, and/or appearing on radio than from royalties on their publications. {16} But if poetry doesn't pay, nor very handsomely do other forms of literature. In Britain, around 70,000 new books are published every year, of which 6,000 are novels. Of these only some 20% have any claim to literary respectability. {17} Returns are generally poor, and often in inverse proportion to the time and effort expended. Of course there are big-earners, multimillionaires even, but in 1988 only some 300 full-time novelists made in excess of £8,000 p.a., with another 300 supplementing income from journalism, and another 900 supplementing income from

some other literary activity. Figures from other countries are equally depressing (e.g. 1250, 750 and 1750 respectively for the States), {18} and will not have improved recently. Any large UK publisher will receive 2000 unsolicited novel manuscripts in a year, and publish 20. The average serious first novel receives half a dozen reviews and perhaps sells 1000 copies over two years. With royalties around 10% at best, writers must learn to mechanically turn out a commercial product or starve. Seventy-five percent of serious writers in the States earn no money at all from their work, ever.

Much more dismal are the proceeds from poetry publishing. A few specialist publishers (e.g. Anvil, Carcanet, Bloodaxe) do turn in respectable figures, but in general poetry is not handled at all (the great majority, e.g. Corgi, HarperCollins, Hodder and Stoughton), is subsidized by sales elsewhere (e.g. Faber and Faber, Peter Owen, OUP) or supported by regional grants (e.g. Peterloo). {19} On the whole, writers do not have outgoing personalities, and special efforts are needed to market them, Betjeman being a notable exception. Many poets, dodging between welfare and dead-end jobs, cultivate a hand-me-down appearance that establishes street cred but does nothing to inspire confidence in the larger world. Moreover, as poetry is the most severely literary of the arts, it does not translate readily to films, TV programmes or mini-series, so that even this last hope of the struggling writer is closed to poets. Amateur practitioners generally self-publish, laying out some

£400-£1000 for 200-500 copies of their collection, and getting back perhaps some £200 after a great deal of effort.

Poetry Competitions

One well-respected means of advancement is the poetry competition, which brings work to the attention of a wider public, most notably that of the larger publishers. Many reputations have begun this way, and submissions to competitions now run to tens if not hundreds of thousands annually in Britain. But the results are often perplexing. It is very difficult to see why certain entries were chosen, entries which are not so much incompetent as hardly poetry at all, and depressing if the winners are any measure of poetic standards.

Possibly the difficulties arise from the nature of the exercise. No one can really sit down and read hundreds of poems a day for weeks on end, and many adjudicators make no attempt to: submissions are filtered well before the big names make their selections. Poems which are conventional, unoriginal, cliché-ridden, marred by poeticisms, which do not address the subject or respect the form prescribed are automatically rejected. Sensibly, no doubt, but there appears to creep in a rather proselytizing view of what poetry should be. Anything remotely resembling the currently unfashionable is damned, so that this timidity may leave only some very odd submissions available for selection.

In literary festivals much depends on the intentions and the

competence of the organizing committee, and these are not sufficiently spelt out. Literary ability is essential, of course, but critical skills are a different matter. Adjudicators must naturally have some professional standing, and it is then difficult to escape the small circle of publishers, critics and established poets — many of whom read from the same Modernist script, if not always with understanding.

There is also the financial aspect. Small magazines are always perilously short of funds, and the annual competition has become an ideal way of replenishing the kitty. A good deal of the £2-5 per submission goes into the prize money, of course, but the process may be purely circular: money is taken from many poets and given to an arbitrary few.

Aesthetic Barbarism

Publishing is now a cut-throat business where many work sweatshop hours. From an office stashed with manuscripts the executives go back to a home equally awash with other people's writings, suggestions and importunings. They read MSS on the train, in the evening and at weekends, so that there is never a moment free. Before attending meetings they will have discussed trends at book launches and fairs, skimmed through the latest reviews, puzzled over other publishers' lists, summarized market research reports, noted their own sales figures, etc.

There is no alternative. Editors and publishers cannot afford to coast along in a trade increasingly geared to short-term profits. Prestigious small publishers have been taken over by

accountants and larger companies, the name retained but not the staff or publishing ethos. The collapse of the Net Book Agreement has sharpened competition, threatened smaller bookshops and promoted the creation of cheap, standardized products for a bulk-buying public. Popularity should not be scoffed at. Many bestsellers are skillfully written, and poets could learn from the deft characterization, economical writing and the techniques used to hold the reader's attention. But the objectives of popular and serious literature are widely different. The first aims to tell a story, hold the reader in suspense, understand the decisions and judgements of ordinary people, and to offer a keen experience of danger, anxiety, love, sorrow etc. without the real world intruding too much. Serious fiction aims to illuminate experience, enlarge perceptions, and investigate our notions of morality without overt moralizing. Where popular fictions deals with crude psychologies and stock responses, serious fiction attempts to be more subtle and intelligent — and is therefore more difficult to write and appreciate. We read popular fiction once and with gusto, but go back repeatedly to serious fiction with delight and admiration, seeing a world more elusive and fascinating than before. {20}

But not all difficulties arise from crass market forces. The publishing business can be laughably amateur. Manuscripts are unacknowledged, lost or returned with inane comments in a manner unthinkable in other walks of life. Anyone who has had a manuscript read by the major publishing houses

will know the hilarious range of response. And since all cannot be adequate assessments, the question arises as whether any are. To deepen suspicion, from time to time little jokes are played on the cognoscenti. The manuscript of a book that had been published with acclaim a decade or so earlier is sent round to the big publishers, only to be rejected — universally, with strictures on the style, content, commercial appeal. Does anyone really know what they're about?

Some difficulties derive from management. The first screening is vital, but is commonly left to junior staff. Some of these will have worked their way up from copy typist, which is very much to their credit, but not provided them with larger understanding. And even when readers possess a first degree in English Literature, which is generally the case, they have not always acquired useful skills, having spent their time repeating abstruse theory. Contrary to current wisdom, appreciation comes with time and wide experience of life, so it is the older hands who will be the better judges, but it is these staff who have been promoted away to finance and administration.

But there are deeper reasons. Much in the arts today is openly barbarous. {21} The Left in particular, disappointed of change in British society, has made literature its rallying point, and tends to look at imaginative writing as pamphleteering to achieve its purposes. But poetry in particular eludes ready formulation. It demands

concentration, the trained ability to read and a willingness to entertain new forms and materials. {22} It also requires a respect for traditions and the sensibilities of the reader. But if amateur writers cheerfully ignore the first, many Postmodernist poets aggressively deny the second, so that the "if it's not hurting it's not working" formula acquires a further meaning. Truth, meaning and social implications are all aspects important to literature, but to make reductive political programmes *the* criteria on which to judge poetry is to wildly misunderstand the arts.

Poetry Reviews and Reviewers

Poetry reviewers should be playing a key role, since no one individual can now read through the great mass of work being published, or even know where to find the more interesting material. But reviewers are not playing that role. To put the matter bluntly — with honourable exceptions, and some well-meaning work in the smaller presses — responsible reviewing is almost extinct. Academic criticism continues, but reviewing is a different animal. The academic article is the fruit of long reflection: not riveting reading, but sound and helpful. Reviewing as currently practised aims to entertain: the evaluation is perfunctory, but the writing is very skilled. More than that, the review aims to show the correct credentials. Whose stock is up or down is well known, or can be easily ascertained by phone calls and reading other reviews, so that the reviewer's task is one of giving "the treatment" to the work in question, as knowingly and entertainingly as possible. Statements to this effect attract abuse, but the evidence is overwhelming: hype of

very moderate talents, unstinting praise for passages of obvious banality and incompetence in the work of leading names, contempt for sound argument, illustration and proper comparisons. {23}

Articles in the popular press (when they appear at all) are therefore amalgamations of very limited research: consultations with friends and establishment figures, with some personal anecdotes thrown in. Reviews in the small presses often tell us more about the reviewer and magazine than the work itself. Interviews with leading poets are reverential for the same reason. And in the mainstream literary magazines? Some do aptly put their finger on a poet's excellences, but always the recommendations need to be carefully assessed in the light of motives and associations of the reviewer. Academics in particular are not going to undermine careers by questioning an author they have made their particular field of study.

In general, reviews do not now select and introduce the better work to the general reading public because that public no longer cares for poetry. The interest has been killed off by contemporary poetry itself, and by the overprotective attitude of reviewers. Since poetry is an endangered species, and its practitioners earn so little from their efforts, it seems unpardonable brutality to lay in with the big stick. Reviewers are often poets themselves, moreover, needing favourable reviews in their turn, so that most will sensibly adopt the magazine's policies and say that the new book is perhaps

not quite up to the standard of the previous and of course excellent collection. Why, given that proper reviewing is a delicate, demanding and hazardous occupation, should anyone take on the work at all? {24}

Because they have to. Poets subsist on such things. Even well-known novelists are not living the sybaritic lifestyles fondly imagined by their public, but depend very much on reviewing to make ends meet. Time allows only a cursory reading of the novel or novels placed each week on their desk, and more effort naturally goes into polishing up the review article that represents their shop-front on the world. Such articles may be little more than entertainment and literary chit-chat, but publicity means sales, and fellow novelists who like to bask in "another dazzling performance" and other such appraisals will return the favour.

But there is more to reviewing than mutual back-scratching. To review is to belong to a literary aristocracy, an exclusive club that looks after its own. Some candour is allowed in private, but image is vital to all parties, not least to the public who need their illusions. Reviewers can therefore suggest that a certain work does not quite come off, but they cannot usually be precise without unravelling a whole skein of unwarranted assumptions. Nor are they likely to. Club membership is attained only after such prolonged effort and cultivation of the right people that good breeding is assured. If accidents happen — someone crassly reports an actual conversation, or a journalist elicits an unguarded

comment — the matter is denied or played down. Only poets of an earlier century with independent means could afford to speak their minds, and even they were mindful of the harsh laws of libel, which allowed fair comment but not damage to careers or reputation.

Elitism

Ever since inception as a university discipline, English Literature has had to define and defend itself. {24} Description, interpretation and evaluation of individual literary productions is the usual claim. And being an academic discipline there had to exist a body of knowledge to impart, and certain skills to teach — hence the literary canon, and academic literary criticism. And for a long time, at least on the surface, all went well. Students dutifully applied themselves before going out to earn a solid living with degrees that no one questioned. Equally unmolested by administrators and politicians, scholars pondered and slowly brought out their articles, monographs and books. To the working poet this material was useful, introducing new authors, and suggesting reasons for modifying or extending appreciation. Used honestly, the critical articles widened their taste and sharpened sensibilities.

All has now changed, for still-debated reasons: funding crises, philistine governments, market accountability, sixties permissiveness, radical ideology, and so on. {25} University life is increasingly competitive, and the pressure mounts to turn out quantity rather than quality, to adopt trendy attitudes, and to pull punches when dealing with

contemporary idols. Little being produced now is of any practical value to poets, though some could be immensely helpful in getting them to understand what they might really be trying to do.

But criticism and poetry were always very different activities — in approach, finished product, in gifts required. No amount of clever talk on significance can supersede literary sensibility, for knowing instinctively that a particular line is botched, pretentious, too easily obtained. Poets acquire that sense by working at their own lines, and by attempting to emulate and improve on their predecessors. Academics have a style of their own — too cautious and involuted to interest professional writers — and they wisely concentrate on dead authors comfortably part of every university syllabus.

These separate worlds have now come together. With no wider public to speak of, and standing among fellow practitioners hardly to be counted on, inclusion in the academic canon is now the dream of many professional poets. If that cannot be attained by academic assessment — the matter is too uncertain and time-consuming — then tutors will place friends' work on reading lists for return support. Not very different from business and the professions, perhaps. But if academia has its own skills and forms of creativity, they are not generally those of novelists, poets and playwrights, and there are dangers in academics playing adjudicator. Nevertheless, inbred academia continues to create the unattractive attitudes of many

graduates who go out to obtain influential jobs in publishing, newspapers and television. Most grow out of their arrogance and patronizing views, but there are still too many newspaper pundits who take on trust what they have learnt but not questioned twenty years before.

Subjugation to Theory

Though originating in academic literary criticism — or in the fusion of criticism with continental philosophy, left-wing politics, psychology and linguistics — literary theory has become its own creature. Literary theory is a philosophy of texts, i.e. of all communications, from the conversational aside to novels, academic treatises and philosophical works. The work is very technical, and its practitioners are almost exclusively academics with a first and often a second degree in some aspect of the subject. Although disseminated through being part of every English Literature student's course, the subject has not found acceptance outside the academic circle of the humanities: criticism, publishing and the art galleries. Nonetheless, since literary criticism tends to adopt its garb, and many poetry reputations are founded and maintained in academia, literary theory can have a stunting influence on the poetry scene.

It is important, indeed essential, that poets understand their purposes. There is, after all, no money or social standing to act as a court of wider approbation. But a danger comes from two directions: the partisan nature of literary theory, and the tendency to confine and legislate for literature.

Critical theory is now a hopeless muddle. Much of it resembles medieval theology, with authorities quoted but not read or understood in context. Many of its supposed authorities are not authorities at all, but figures marginal to or now superseded in their professions. Evidence, worked examples and close argument are thin on the ground, and theorists seem unaware of more plausible philosophical positions. Very often the disquisitions are too muddled and jejune for professional philosophers to want to waste time and reputations sorting out, so that literary theorists write for a small circle of admirers while the rest of the world does something else.

But a good deal of contemporary work is entwined about these speculative concepts. Poets are ranked as to how they conform to theoretical notions, and the notions themselves are illustrated by poetry: an entirely circular process, unsustainable in the everyday world and therefore defended vehemently. The radicals fought complacency and snobbery to get into academia, and have now retaliated by throwing out the yardsticks by which literature was once valued. On the advice of linguists and educationalists, whose work largely repeats unexamined dogma, many secondary schoolteachers no longer teach standard English, let alone the elements of grammar and versification. {26} Sensible precepts that have stood the test of time have not so much been attacked (which is healthy and productive) but derided and suppressed. References in course material — for university degrees, adult appreciation classes, practical

workshops — are very selective, and many poets have little idea of what exists to help, sustain or inspire.

Classes, Workshops and Literary Groups

Writing is often a lonely activity, and editors haven't the time to write critiques or even reasons for rejecting submissions. What could be more sensible than classes, workshops and writing groups where participants can learn from each other and gain some confidence and sense of solidarity? Many do indeed fulfill these roles, and are happy social gatherings, an evening away from the distractions of the office and home life.

And sometimes that is the trouble. Many attending are part-timers, writing only sufficient — in odd moments or coming up on the train — to maintain their membership. But that does not mean they will cede authority on that account. Far from it. Quality that they have not the time, inclination nor talent to produce themselves they tend to disparage in others, finding such kinship with better literary society an unacceptable affectation. Moreover, not having read widely in poetry or literary criticism, and so quite unable to distinguish the good from the indifferent among published contemporaries, they indulge in all that a conscientious writer should avoid, sensing abstentions as an attack on their own talents. Around them gather like-minded individuals, and better writers go elsewhere.

In general, moreover, established poets prefer the company of equals, and in their absence the newcomer may be met

with a dogmatism that establishes pecking order in the group but is entirely useless as guidance or encouragement. Criticism needs to be sane, constructive, generous and tactful, but participants can lack the reading and social skills to achieve that, and many recipients will recall, decades later, some particularly wounding or asinine remark.

Much depends on the organizer. Some groups rotate the chair, which allows everyone to get into difficulties. Some have invited conveners, young and impoverished generally, who do their honest best but can offer no more than politeness to work of unfavoured style and content. Most groups have a resident chairperson, which provides continuity but also a predictability in responses and suggestions.

Something also seems inhibitory about workshops. Poems which are perfectly clear in retrospect, and which would have been discussed sensibly over a cup of coffee with a fellow poet, tend in group discussion to become the focus of amazingly obtuse and unhelpful observations. No one knows why this is so, but few cannot but have memories of their own transgressions. Even to have had the work circulated beforehand, so that contributors can assess and prepare their suggestions carefully, which is obligatory in many groups, seems not a sufficient precaution. Multiple discussion becomes theatre, and perhaps needs clear rules if the performance is work effectively. And poems, often the better poems, which communicate reader to reader, silently,

with depth and subtle nuance, are disadvantaged by the whole approach.

Quality in Poetry

In receipt of a \$200 million bequest, {27} The Poetry Foundation has put an enormous quantity of poetry on line, but, {28} while it's heart-warming to see its detailed and thoughtful articles, with so many figures rescued from neglect, the bulk of the work has a depressing effect. So much seems only cleverly different. Perhaps poetry really is difficult to write. Britain's Poetry Library, among its attractive articles, news and events, also puts on line representative samples from its extensive records of British poetry magazines, {29} but good poems are also hard to find. {30} Perhaps the selections were made by junior staff. But when we look at leading poetry translation sites, {31-32} where the task is simply one of craft, of conveying something excellent in one language into excellence in another, the same deadening uniformity appears. What happened to the verve, variety and beauty of the original?

The avant-garde prized originality above all things, and zealously guarded their work from acceptance by the profane majority. {33} Modernism was highbrow, and though it presupposed familiarity with the great works of the past, it consciously set out to overturn traditional values. Art was not to serve society, but the self-admiration of small and prestigious cliques. Modernist literature fractured syntax, and replaced plot and character by myth and psychoanalysis. As a logical extension of 'art for art's sake',

Modernism clearly drew on itself, seeking an existence outside time and context, with no clear boundary between the public and private worlds. Genre boundaries were shifted, and autonomy secured by fragmentation and montage. {34}

How did it succeed? Through the pertinacity and astonishing self confidence of its founders. Much of the financial support came from wealthy patrons, particularly women, and afterwards from small magazines that had a name to make. But the establishment was hostile for decades, until iconoclasm combined with the interests of the young escaping from the restrictions and hypocrisies of their elders. {35} Thereafter, in the thirties and forties, proselytising was carried out by the educational establishments, notably Oxbridge and Ivy League universities, where it still holds sway.

Being avant-garde, Modernism had always to move on. Already absolved from any responsibility to tell the truth, or even to represent the outside world, art looked into the tortuous paths of its own thought processes, coming finally to question its own status. {36} Art was not representation, but a reflecting mirror of codes that had to be deciphered. And not only had each art-form its characteristic codes, but each artist played them slightly differently: Cezanne's language was not Matisse's. {37} But the Poststructuralists went much further. Words refer only to themselves, said Derrida, and there is no final interpretation, only an endless

chain of deferring. The artist does not exist, declared Barthes, and the meaning of texts are simply what their readers choose to read into them. {38}

What's to be made of this? Firstly there are the counter-arguments of the embattled literary establishment, who attacked the self-admiring rhetoric of these audacious theorists, showing that many did not understand the authorities quoted. {39} Then there is the work of the Anglo-American schools of philosophy — Quine, Searle, Davidson {6, 40} — who acknowledge the difficulties in pinning down truth and meaning, but don't find that an argument for junking all reasoning. {41} And then there are the Marxist writers who see a sick society reflected in a sick literature: in fragmentation, alienation, disenchantment. With common purpose removed, man has struggled to find reasons for existence. The meaning of life has seeped from politics and public life, taking a niggardly refuge in the private world of abstruse thought and material consumption. {42}

Earlier books and articles on the founders of Modernism explained what was puzzling and different about the new poetries. In doing so they provided a sterling service to readers, opening realms of opportunity barely glimpsed before. Not to be neglected as well are the many books and articles of interest that continue to pour off the academic and small presses: essential reading for anyone who wants to know where serious poetry is headed, and why. But these

works do not start at square one: they accept the tacit assumptions of today's poetry, and do not generally question what needs to be questioned.

The need, as I see it, is firstly to examine the roots of Modernism and Postmodernism in some depth, from proper philosophic bases, and see what survives that scrutiny — which is what I have tried to do with my 'Background to Critical Theory' and sections of 'Writing Verse': both free ebooks, down-loadable from Ocaso Press. {6, 40} I have also added some webpages here on the founding fathers of Modernism, assessing their work in a way academia is not inclined to do.

The second need is to re-examine work in alternative traditions, employing material provided by the two ebooks. The first was theoretical and general; the second is detailed and practical. What assumptions have been made in writing the poetry? How do the assumptions stand in the larger context of the humanities? What have been the immediate consequences, and do any failures or shortcomings result from theory or that great imponderable: poetic talent? That second approach is the larger aim of the 'reassessments' material, one I hope to encompass as time permits: it's a big task.

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Early Modernist Poetry and its Competition

Minor Poets

Most surveys acknowledge that Modernism was a complex affair with different themes and personalities playing a changing role over the half century to its formal acceptance by English literature departments on both sides of the Atlantic. But behind many studies and courses is the unspoken assumption that Modernist poetry was self-evidently superior — broader-based, more relevant, better written — than the poetry it displaced. Even the best of critical histories {1} seem to say: 'Yes, traditional poetry was good enough in its way, and had a wide audience, but it was rather outmoded in diction, style and content. It wasn't relevant, wasn't the way forward, and doesn't help us understand the serious poetry written today.'

Survey Aims

I am not trying to set up an aunt Sally by over-simplifying matters, but it may help to see what Modernism was avoiding by looking at what the parties to the contest were actually producing. To keep the subject manageable, I shall survey only the first two decades of the twentieth century, and compare the best work of the Modernists with the best work of the *minor* poets, or those we consider minor today. For the present I shall leave out of account the major voices of Hardy, Yeats, Frost, de la Mare, Masefield, Bridges and Housman.

First the traditionalists, in no particular order. I have taken representative names from David Perkin's survey {1}, and will omit biographies and critiques as these can now be looked up on the Internet.

Maurice Baring

Dostoyevsky {2}

You healed the sore, you made the fearful brave,
They bless you for your lasting legacy;
The balm, the tears, the fragrant charity
You sought and treasured in your living grave.
The gifts you humbly took you greatly gave,
For solace of the soul in agony,
When through the bars the brutal passions pry,
And mock the bonds of the celestial slave.
You wandered in the uttermost abyss;
And there, amidst the ashes and the dust,
You spoke no word of anger or of pride;
You found the prints of steps divine to kiss;
You looked right upwards to the stars, you cried:
"Hosanna to the Lord, for He is just."

A traditional sonnet, but some inversion of usual word order and elevated language: not unusual for its time but rather dated now.

Stephen Phillips

from *Orestes* {3}

Me in far lands did Justice call, cold queen
Among the dead, who after heat and haste
At length have leisure for her steadfast voice,
That gathers peace from the great deeps of hell.
She call'd me, saying: 'I heard a cry by night!
Go thou, and question not; within thy halls
My will awaits fulfilment. Lo, the dead
Cries out before me in the under-world.
Seek not to justify thyself: in me
Be strong, and I will show thee wise in time;
For, though my face be dark, yet unto those
Who truly follow me through storm or shine,
For these the veil shall fall, and they shall see
They walked with Wisdom, though they knew her not.

Similar to the Baring piece, but also ending strongly. This is 'civic' or 'uplifting' poetry, of course, and with a vengeance, but with strongly modeled lines.

R.C. Trevelyan

from *The Thrush's Song* {4}

To yon thicket hind and hart go rarely.
(Flower of the bramble!)

Green have grown the woods early, so early.
Tell me, maiden, whom seek'st thou here?
Through the leaves why dost thou peer?
In these green woods wherefore dost thou ramble?
Oh beware, beware
Thorns that catch and tear!
Between the briars the primrose spreads so sweetly.

Outdated in diction of course, but comparable in sentiment to the 1899 Yeats's poem *Down by the Sally Gardens*. {5}

Alfred Noyes

from *A Song of Sherwood* {6}

Sherwood in the twilight, is Robin Hood awake?
Grey and ghostly shadows are gliding through the brake;
Shadows of the dappled deer, dreaming of the morn,
Dreaming of a shadowy man that winds a shadowy horn.

Robin Hood is here again: all his merry thieves
Hear a ghostly bugle-note shivering through the leaves,
Calling as he used to call, faint and far away,
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

Rather weakly adjectival, again not unlike early Yeats, but without the dreamy tone and Irish mythology.

William Watson

April Song {7}
April, April,
Laugh thy girlish laughter;
Then, the moment after,
Weep thy girlish tears!
April, that mine ears
Like a lover greetest,
If I tell thee, sweetest,
All my hopes and fears,
April, April,
Laugh thy golden laughter,
But, the moment after,
Weep thy golden tears!

Watson is better known for his patriotic odes, but could also turn his hand to lyric trifles.

So far the traditional poetry is rather tame and disappointing.

Maurice Hewlett

To The Belgians {8}

O men of mickle heart and little speech,
Slow, stubborn countrymen of heath and plain,
Now have ye shown these insolent again
That which to Caesar's legions ye could teach,

That slow-provok'd is long-provok'd. May each
Crass Caesar learn this of the Keltic grain,
Until at last they reckon it in vain
To browbeat us who hold the Western reach.
For even as you, so we are, ill to rouse,
Rooted in Custom, Order, Church and King;
And as you fight for their sake, so shall we,
Stubbornly, inch by inch, and house by house;
Seeing for us, too, there's a dearer thing
Than land or blood — and that thing Liberty.

A traditional sonnet, but note how terse and exact is the language.

Sara Teasdale

The Broken Field {9}

My soul is a dark ploughed field
In the cold rain;
My soul is a broken field
Ploughed by pain.

Where windy grass and flowers
Were growing,
The field lies broken now
For another sowing.

Great Sower, when you tread

My field again,
Scatter the furrows there
With better grain.

Sara Teasdale was not a Modernist but her simple poems were direct and deeply felt.

Rupert Brooke

The Soldier {10}

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust conceal'd;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air.
Wash'd by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

An accomplished piece, famous in its day. Note the quiet tone and varied phrasing.

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Ashes of Life {11}

Love has gone and left me and the days are all alike;
Eat I must, and sleep I will, — and would that night were
here!
But ah! — to lie awake and hear the slow hours strike!
Would that it were day again! — with twilight near!

A free spirit and Pulitzer Prize-winner, Edna St. Vincent Millay was one of the most respected and famous poets of her day.

Wilfred Owen

from Anthem for Doomed Youth {12}

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Another famous poem of WWI, with an ending that expands across the country homes that sent their sons to fight.

Edgar Lee Masters

Doc Hill {13}

I went up and down the streets
Here and there by day and night,
Through all hours of the night caring for the poor who were
sick.
Do you know why?
My wife hated me, my son went to the dogs.
And I turned to the people and poured out my love to them.
Sweet it was to see the crowds about the lawns on the day
of my funeral,
And hear them murmur their love and sorrow.
But oh, dear God, my soul trembled, scarcely able
To hold to the railing of the new life
When I saw Em Stanton behind the oak tree
At the grave,
Hiding herself, and her grief!

Enormously popular in their day were these 243 pen-
sketches of characters from the fictional town of Spoon
River, a composite of Lewistown and Petersburg. As poems
the pieces barely lift above prose, but they are alive,
unsparingly realistic in the American rural tradition.

Carl Sandburg

from Chicago {14}

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have
seen your painted women under the gas lamps luring the
farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is
true I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.
And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the
faces of women and children I have seen the marks of
wanton hunger.

And having answered so I turn once more to those who
sneer at this my city, and I give them back the sneer and
say to them:

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so
proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.
Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job,
here is a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft
cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a
savage pitted against the wilderness,

No one could call this piece irrelevant: such directly-phrased
portraits of the contemporary world were a shock to readers
brought up on more genteel traditions.

Vachel Lindsay

from General William Booth Enters Into Heaven {15}

Booth led boldly with his big bass drum-
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
The Saints smiled gravely and they said: "He's come."
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,
Lurching bravoos from the ditches dank,
Drabs from the alleyways and drug fiends pale —
Minds still passion-ridden, soul-powers frail: —
Vermin-eaten saints with mouldy breath,
Unwashed legions with the ways of Death —
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

Such poems demand to be acted out, and Lindsay did just that, making him enormously popular, indeed famous.

Edwin Arlington Robinson

from The Growth of Lorraine {16}

While I stood listening, discreetly dumb,
Lorraine was having the last word with me:
"I know," she said, "I know it, but you see
Some creatures are born fortunate, and some
Are born to be found out and overcome, —
Born to be slaves, to let the rest go free;
And if I'm one of them (and I must be)

You may as well forget me and go home.
"You tell me not to say these things, I know,
But I should never try to be content:
I've gone too far; the life would be too slow.
Some could have done it—some girls have the stuff;
But I can't do it: I don't know enough.
I'm going to the devil."—And she went.

Again, this is straight-talking. Robinson was probably the most under-estimated American poet of his day — innovative, independent and determined, but also, especially in his narrative and philosophic works, hopelessly prolix. No one can read poems that go for eighty or a hundred pages at a stretch.

James Elroy Flecker

from *The Old Ships* {17}

I have seen old ships like swans asleep
Beyond the village which men call Tyre,
With leaden age o'ercargoed, dipping deep
For Famagusta and the hidden sun
That rings black Cyprus with a lake of fire;
And all those ships were certainly so old
Who knows how oft with squat and noisy gun,
Questing brown slaves or Syrian oranges,
The pirate Genoese
Hell-raked them till they rolled

Blood, water, fruit and corpses up the hold.
But now through friendly seas they softly run,
Painted the mid-sea blue or shore-sea green,
Still patterned with the vine and grapes in gold.

A well-known poem, outstanding in its rhythmic control and telling imagery.

G. K. Chesterton

from Lepanto {18}

White founts falling in the courts of the sun,
And the Soldan of Byzantium is smiling as they run;
There is laughter like the fountains in that face of all men
feared,
It stirs the forest darkness, the darkness of his beard,
It curls the blood-red crescent, the crescent of his lips,
For the inmost sea of all the earth is shaken with his ships.
They have dared the white republics up the capes of Italy,
They have dashed the Adriatic round the Lion of the Sea,
And the Pope has cast his arms abroad for agony and loss,
And called the kings of Christendom for swords about the
Cross,
The cold queen of England is looking in the glass;
The shadow of the Valois is yawning at the Mass;
From evening isles fantastical rings faint the Spanish gun,
And the Lord upon the Golden Horn is laughing in the sun.

Only verse, but good verse, with an infectious rhythm.

Hilaire Belloc

from *The South Country* {19}

When I am living in the Midlands
That are sodden and unkind,
I light my lamp in the evening:
My work is left behind;
And the great hills of the South Country
Come back into my mind.

Like Chesterton, Belloc was not a poet but an occasional verse writer, yet this is a piece of haunting nostalgia uses adjectives ostensibly simple but in fact operating on several levels.

Modernist Poets

I am taking examples of Modernist poetry from that most useful of anthologies: *The New Poetry* by Harriet Monroe (1917, enlarged in 1923). {20} Several points should be made. To an extent that will surprise a reader familiar only with only standard accounts, our appreciation, and even our understanding, of poets very much depends on the selections presented by the more influential anthologies. Those by Harriet Monroe and Louis Untermeyer {21} helped to define what was meant by 'Modernism', while others, such as the popular *Verse of Our Day* by Gordon and King (1923) have a much more traditional and homely air.

{22} But even Monroe can represent William Carlos Williams with:

William Carlos Williams

from Sicilian Emigrant's Song {23}

O-eh-lee! La-la!
Donna! Donna!
Blue is the sky of Palermo;
Blue is the little bay;
And dost thou remember the orange and fig,
The lively sun and the sea breeze at evening?
Hey-la!
Donna! Donna! Maria!

The thirteen other pieces by Williams in the anthology are equally descriptive pieces but with less dated diction. Some poets mature slowly, or, conversely, the promise falls off, or is overtaken by other aims. Did Ezra Pound, for example, write anything more evocative than the 1910 'The Coming of War: Actaeon, also in the Monroe anthology?

Ezra Pound

from The Coming of War: Actaeon {24}

An image of Lethe,

And the fields
Full of faint light
 But golden,
Gray cliffs,
 and beneath them
A sea

The second point concerns 'tone' or the poet's 'voice'
Modernist poems are generally more sophisticated, elitist
and given to allusion. Put another way, the poetry becomes
less heartfelt, less elevated and less rooted in a recognizable
landscape. Much of the imagery of poems by Pound, Eliot
and others derive from French models, of course, especially
the Symbolists, but poets also took to distancing themselves
from readers by using persona that could serve as teasing or
unreliable narrators, i.e. could comment on their own
responses, as Pound was to do so in his contentious
'Homage to Sextus Propertius'. {25}

T.S. Eliot

from Portrait of a Lady {26}

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression . . . dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.
Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance . . .
Well! and what if she should die some afternoon,

Afternoon gray and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
With the smoke coming down above the house tops;
Doubtful, for quite a while
Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon . . .
Would she not have the advantage, after all?
This music is successful with a "dying fall"
Now that we talk of dying —
And should I have the right to smile?

Eliot is here adopting the self-conscious, troubled persona he would extend in his famous 'Wasteland'.

The third point to make is that the Modernist poets had largely found their individual voices before 1920. Wallace Stevens's poems were to grow more enigmatic (and problematic), but they started as pieces firmly rooted in sensuous experience.

Wallace Stevens

Pecksniffiana {27}

Barque of phosphor
On the palmy beach,

Move outward into heaven,
Into the alabasters

And night blues.

Foam and cloud are one.
Sultry moon-monsters
Are dissolving.

Fill your black hull
With white moonlight.

There will never be an end
To this droning of the surf.

The real exception to such conformity is Ezra Pound, who was to make important detours with the Seafarer {28}, Cathay {29} and Homage to Sextus Propertius, {30} before taking up his life's mission in the Cantos. Eliot already had his half verse-half prose style, and the themes he would explore in The Four Quartets and verse plays. William Carlos Williams' diction gradually grows more American and natural, indeed colloquial.

The fourth point is that, by the showing of the Monroe anthology, Eliot and Pound have by far the most thought-provoking poems. But they are not necessarily the most accomplished work. As poems, I'd have thought the pieces by Flecker, Owen, Brooke and Belloc were their equal. That 'thought-provoking', for want of a better term, lies not entirely in what they say, moreover, but what they point to, that depth of importance which Eliot and then a vast critical

industry sought to attach to poetry.

A fifth point is the 'unspiritual' nature of Modernist verse. Traditional American poetry in the early years of the twentieth century was popular and profitable, having, its supporters declared, the ability to 'beget spiritual sensibility, to build character, and to refine one's sense of beauty, truth, or morality.' {31}

Wider Comparisons: Major British Poets

Some of the better poems represent a level only occasionally achieved, however, and a fairer comparison needs to bring in the major poets of the time. Yeats I have considered elsewhere, and I will leave Frost out of consideration because of doubts as to whether he should be put in the Modernist or conventional tradition. Both Hardy and Bridges really belong to an earlier generation, but were much read during this period. It's exceptionally difficult to represent the best as brief snippets, of course, but readers can search further and make their own choices:

Thomas Hardy

from Castle Boterel {32}

And to me, though Time's unflinching rigour,
In mindless rote, has ruled from sight
The substance now, one phantom figure
Remains on the slope, as when that night
Saw us alight.

I look and see it there, shrinking, shrinking,
I look back at it amid the rain
For the very last time; for my sand is sinking,
And I shall traverse old love's domain
Never again.

Robert Bridges

from London Snow {33}

When men were all asleep the snow came flying,
In large white flakes falling on the city brown,
Stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying,
Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town;
Deadening, muffling, stifling its murmurs failing;
Lazily and incessantly floating down and down:
Silently sifting and veiling road, roof and railing;
Hiding difference, making unevenness even,
Into angles and crevices softly drifting and sailing.

Walter del la Mare

from Collected Poems {34}

When I lie where shades of darkness
Shall no more assail mine eyes,
Nor the rain make lamentation
When the wind sighs;

How will fare the world whose wonder
Was the very proof of me?
Memory fades, must the remembered
Perishing be?

Oh, when this my dust surrenders
Hand, foot, lip, to dust again,
May these loved and loving faces
Please other men!
May the rusting harvest hedgerow
Still the Traveller's Joy entwine,
And as happy children gather
Posies once mine.

Look thy last on all things lovely,
Every hour. Let no night
Seal thy sense in deathly slumber
Till to delight
Thou have paid thy utmost blessing;
Since that all things thou wouldst praise
Beauty took from those who loved them
In other days.

John Masefield

from Sea Fever {35}

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the
sky,

And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's
shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn
breaking.

A.E. Housman

Into My Heart An Air That Kills {36}

Into my heart on air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

If we can set aside our contemporary prejudices, I think we will have to conclude that the best work by the traditionalists outdistances what the Modernists were achieving. Bridges shows close observation missing from William Carlos Williams. There is nothing to match the sense of personal loss in At Castle Boterel, the sadness of Owen's piece, or the piercing desolation of Housman's. The rhythm of Sea Fever was new to English poetry. I like the Wallace

Stevens piece, but it's nothing beside Walter de la Mare's Fare Well.

Strategies of Modernism

At their best — and they're often not at their best: poetry is a very difficult medium — the traditional poems seem 'given' to their authors, to have a dimension of truth that's found more than created. In contrast, Modernist poems have a manufactured air: clever but somewhat portentous, promising more than they quite deliver. The minor Modernists are even less successful, of course, and the reason was probably the fad for novelty. What they tried was novel and refreshing, but in verse terms rather limited.

Let's return to Pound's enigmatic poem and see what literary criticism has made of the piece. Scott Hamilton {37} notes the musicality of the verse in its broken lines, drawing attention to the similar way the hard landscape of some of Tristan Corbière's poems dissolves in the pale moonlight. Pound had included Corbière in his 1918 *Study of French Poets*, and Dr Hamilton draws parallels between the poets's 'La Rapsode foraine et le pardon de Sainte Anne' and Virgil's 'incertum lunam sub luce maligna'. Above the moon there is order ; below the moon there is only uncertainty. Pound's Actaeon has crossed the Stygian marsh and entered the underworld. Pound invokes the image of Diana-Hecate-Artemis of the Hellenic and Celtic worlds where Actaeon was punished simply because of ill-fortune, just as Corbière's drowned sailors and Pound's dead soldiers are punished for being caught at the mercy of fate. Pound does not ignore

the horrors of war, or glorify its casualties as traditional poets were doing, but sees death and misfortune in a larger, mythic setting that gives meaning without a sentimentalizing matters. Pound's enigmatic lines are therefore like those Japanese paper flowers that expand from tiny fragments into their full shape when immersed in water, and they also need critical treatment as much as the flowers need water to display their beauty.

Does this help us to appreciate Pound's poem? Immensely so, but there is an important qualification. Traditionally in poetry, the expression is as important as the content. The poem is expected to spell out what it is saying in a beautiful and moving way. Pound's approach side-steps that need, through what would be called in programming a subroutine. The work is done outside the main program, in repeated calls on a subsidiary elements that work in another dimension. Pound's piece happens to be beautiful, but the beauty is not part of the message relevant to this world, and emotion is only released vicariously, on extensive reading of other poems in other languages. Much of the Cantos are written in this way, where the images, often puzzling, do not directly further the meaning, even when deciphered. Some would call this less than honest, since it's perfectly possible to come up with some poetic doodle, which really makes no sense in this world, but which could nonetheless be elucidated by scholarly erudition. I'd better give an example:

We came to the land of Cronus, fat

with sheep and divinations.

Bones

Dwindle into dry offerings. I
Have seen too much
dust, weeping and lamentation

What does this doodle I've written mean? I couldn't say, but would have no difficulty in writing long paragraphs on man's overweening pride, on spiritual aridity, on the Jewish and Hellenic conceptions of repentance, and the like. And with poetry so created, by intellectual diversions, I could be entirely sincere in the matter, allowing each explanation to suggest new lines and new insights. No doubt, with a little confused reading in associated matters, I could warm to the enterprise, indeed become quite excited. Let's try to get Pound's truncated musicality, remembering that Cronus devoured his children to evade the prophecy that he would be overthrown by them.

Into the land of Cronus,
fat with cattle and inscrutable divinations
we came. Bones
dwindled into dry offerings. I
who had seen much,
much of weeping and lamentation,
of towers of dust in the conifer heat,
recall
only the haze and a cool wind at evening
that came with quietness at each

resettlement of earth.

That's easily done: no rhymes to meet, or metre, or line length constraints: about ten minute's work. (And, because easily done, disallowed by Modernism under charges of plagiarism: poets must find new pastures rather than enrich the already existing.) But note the strategy. We have moved the setting to a vaguely classical and/or Mediterranean one, left a few conundrums for academics to get their teeth into, and opened a parallel universe in which the poem 'works', if it works at all. Is that what Pound and Eliot were doing? It was one thing to assert, no doubt correctly, that minor English poetry at the turn of the century was hopelessly ingrown, self-congratulatory and provincial, but quite another to replace the workaday world of most people, which poetry, at some removes, has to make emotional sense of, with detours into the classical world, Provençal song or Paris city life. Let's look again at the Pound poem, which is short enough to be quoted in its entirety:

An image of Lethe,
 And the fields
Full of faint light
 But golden,
Gray cliffs,
 and beneath them
A sea

Harsher than granite,
unstill, never ceasing;

High forms

with the movement of gods,
Perilous aspect; And one said:
"This is Acaeon." Actaeon of golden greaves!

Over fair meadows,
Over the cool face of that field,
Unstill, ever moving,
Host of an ancient people,
The silent cortège.

To understand the poem we need to know more than the familiar story of Actaeon and Diana, that in fact the man was a Theban hero and that his death can be seen as a ritual human sacrifice to please the gods or goddesses. But it's a very oblique comment on the horrific slaughter of WWI, and surely even more escapist than the stirring poems of patriotic heroism the literary establishment were promoting.

When literature courses expanded in the flood of educational spending that followed economic recovery from WWII, Modernist poetry became an accepted field of study in which academics could employ their customary wide reading, intelligence and steady application. In that new setting, poetry would still be made by skill, sensibility and inspiration, but its frames of reference had shifted to include

a good deal of theory. How that theory came to substitute for poetry itself can be found in other webpages here.

More generally, what I am suggesting is this: Modernist poetry set out to be different — to challenge the old regime that had led to WWI, to focus on more mundane, urban and even uninspiring themes, and to replace verse with a democratic though deftly-fingered prose. Yet, against the odds and doubtful theory, {38} despite the 'innovations', a poetry of sorts did still survive, though one that became increasingly unread. Today an unnecessarily difficult and often crippled poetry has morphed into the 'serious stuff', the poetry that schools and colleges promote as the only way forward, despite its thinning subject matter and declining readership.

Modernism slowly went off the rails, in short, and now caters for specialist interests. Where are the everyday affections, the 'human interest angle' that magazines and newspapers need for decent circulation figures? Where in today's 'serious poetry' do we find the larger issues of mankind discussed or alluded to — our common humanity, pride in home, country and its institutions, political affiliations, apprehension of truth and beauty, the matters that give dignity and purpose to lives? Victorian poetry was no doubt escapist, but not as wholly ingrown as ours. Literary histories denigrate The Georgians, but their Modernist contemporaries were even less palatable to the general reading public. Scan the small presses: how much of the material would serve for even a

modestly entertaining letter? All that once made poetry worth reading has been delegated to 'amateur' status, beneath the notice of academia and the small presses.

Traditional themes will return, I'll venture to predict, however unlikely that must now seem. Nothing resists honest enquiry for ever, and even historical matters as settled as the causes of the Russian Revolution, for example, are receiving sustained attention. Economic breakdown, war weariness, and discontent with the autocratic system of government overthrew the tsarist government, certainly, but that government was not so incompetent as supposed, argue the revisionist Russian historians. {39} Russia coped very well in the early stages of the war, and, by tying up troops on the Russian front, in fact denied the Germans victory at the Marne and thereafter. Russia did not so much collapse as suffer a violent coup by the Bolsheviks. 'The Soviet government had little support and no moral base, so it came to rely on coercion and violence to retain power and push through policy changes.' {40} Something similar happened in the genteel world of poetry, I'd surmise, and not necessarily for the better. But, like the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, the unthinkable may still happen.

I have only briefly touched on the competition to Modernist poetry, but perhaps we should keep the alternatives in mind when examining the work of Eliot, Williams, Stevens and others on this site.

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Definitions of Poetry

Before Modernism, poetry was a straightforward matter. Indeed the definition of poetry could be looked up in a dictionary. 'Poetry,' says the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 'is elevated thought or feeling in metrical or rhythmic form'. And the bulk of poetry learned at school (and probably still remembered) was indeed like that: striking in thought and persuasively harmonious in expression. There was hardly a need for a definition of poetry: poems were self-evidently passages of beautiful writing, shaped by rhyme and metre about a moving or uplifting theme. Amateur poetry is still that way, of course, and immensely popular, far more so than the work being appearing in literary magazines or the Arts section of our leading newspapers.

However out of touch, traditionalists believe that poems give enduring and universal life to what was merely transitory and particular. Through them, the poet expresses his vision, real or imaginative, and he does so in forms that are intelligible and pleasurable to others, and likely to arouse emotions akin to his own. Poetry is language organised for aesthetic purposes. Whatever else it does, poetry must bear witness, must fulfil the cry: 'let not my heart forget what mine eyes have seen.' A poem is distinguished by the feeling that dictates it and that which it communicates, by the economy and resonance of its language, and by the imaginative power that integrates, intensifies and enhances experience. Poems bear some relationship to real life but are

equally autonomous and in-dependent entities that contain within themselves the reason why they are so and not otherwise. Unlike discourse, which proceeds by logical steps, poetry is intuited whole as a presentiment of thought and/or feeling. Workaday prose is an abbreviation of reality: poetry is its intensification.

Poems have a transcendental quality: there is a sudden transformation through which words assume a particular importance. Like a bar of music, or a small element in a holographic image, a phrase in a poem has the power to immediately call up whole ranges of possibilities and expectations. Art is a way of knowing, and is valuable in proportion to the justice with which it evaluates that knowledge. Poetry is an embodiment of human values, not a kind of syntax. True symbolism in poetry allows the particular to represent the more general, not as a dream or shadow, but as the momentary, living revelation of the inscrutable.

The poet's task is to resurrect the outer, transient and perishable world within himself, to transform it into something much more real. He must recognize pattern wherever he sees it, and build his perceptions into poetic form that has the coherence and urgency to persuade us of its truth: the intellectual has to be fused with the sensuous meaning. All poets borrow, but where good poets improve on their borrowing, the bad debase. The greatness of the poet is measurable by the real significance of the

resemblances on which he builds, the depth of the roots in the constitution, if not of the physical world, then of the moral and emotional nature of man.

Poetry can be verse or prose. Verse has a strong metrical element. An inner music is the soul of poetry. Poetry withers and dries out when it leaves music, or at least some imagined music, too far behind. The diction of poetry is a fiction, neither that of the speaker nor the audience. Without its contrivance po-etry is still possible, but is immensely poorer. Subtly the vocabulary of poetry changes with the period, but words too familiar or too remote defeat the purpose of the poet. But today's 'serious poetry' is a different creature, unashamedly Modernist, if we include Postmodernism and experimental poetry in the term. Serious poetry is the poetry written in schools and poetry workshops, published by hundreds of small presses, and reviewed by serious newspapers and literary journals — a highbrow, coterie poetry that isn't popular and doesn't profess to be. To its devotees, Modernist styles are the only way of dealing with contemporary matters, and they do not see them as a specialized development of traditional poetry, small elements being pushed in unusual directions, and sometimes extended beyond the limits of ready comprehension.

For the 'difficulties' with Modernism I look at the work of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, W.H. Auden, J.H. Prynne, John Ashbery and Geoffrey Hill. But rather than accept these as shortcomings

of the poetry itself, what, in fact, prevents the poem working properly — i.e. the obscurity, plain prose styles and the cleverness that doesn't quite deliver sense — contemporaries have championed these as distinctive and necessary features of poetry today. To be authentic, a poem must be Modernist, and only with such characteristics can a poem find a quality publisher. A definition of poetry today is scarcely possible, but we can note its underlying beliefs and assumptions:

1. Experimentation

Belief that previous writing was stereotyped and inadequate
Ceaseless technical innovation, sometimes for its own sake
Originality: deviation from the norm, or from usual reader expectations
Ruthless rejection of the past, even iconoclasm

2. Anti-realism

Sacralisation of art, which must represent itself, not something beyond
Preference for allusion (often private) rather than description
World seen through the artist's inner feelings and mental states
Themes and vantage points chosen to question the conventional view
Use of myth and unconscious forces rather than motivations of conventional plot

3. Individualism

Promotion of the artist's viewpoint, at the expense of the communal

Cultivation of an individual consciousness, which alone is the final arbiter

Estrangement from religion, nature, science, economy or social mechanisms

Maintenance of a wary intellectual independence

Artists and not society should judge the arts: extreme self-consciousness

Search for the primary image, devoid of comment: stream of consciousness

Exclusiveness, an aristocracy of the avant-garde

4. Intellectualism

Writing more cerebral than emotional

Work is tentative, analytical and fragmentary, more posing questions more than answering them

Cool observation: viewpoints and characters detached and depersonalized

Open-ended work, not finished, nor aiming at formal perfection

Involuted: the subject is often act of writing itself and not the ostensible referent

Aesthetics

Definitions of Poetry

Since poetry is an art form, it should be governed by the general rules of art. Definitions are tricky matters, as lawyers find when wording documents that unambiguously refer to the terms of an agreement, but in place of a definition of poetry we could look at aesthetics, the philosophy of art. Where a definition could be unfairly applied by one school of poetry to exclude another — and today there are many contending schools, all rigorously opposed to each other — philosophy attempts to find the generality that is true across all possible worlds. What indeed is art? What (to adopt the philosopher's approach) are its necessary and sufficient conditions?

Here is a brief overview, which may be skipped by the busy reader, but shows how little the serious poetry article generally understands of the larger dimensions of art. (The material has been quarried from my free ebook *Background to Critical Theory*, which is extensively annotated.)

Many have been proposed — countless, stretching back to ancient Greece — but one of the most complete is that of Tatarkiewicz. His six conditions are: beauty, form, representation, reproduction of reality, artistic expression and innovation. Will that do? Unfortunately, it is difficult to pin these terms down sufficiently, to incorporate them into necessary and sufficient conditions — do they all have to be present? — and to cover the aspect of quality. Even in the

most hackneyed piece of commercial art we shall find these conditions satisfied to some extent. How do we specify the sufficient extent? By common agreement, a consensus of public taste? {1}

Take a less time-bound view and consider art down the ages? Then we have problems of shifting boundaries and expectations. The Greeks did not distinguish between art and craft, but used the one word, *techné*, and judged achievement on goodness of use. In fact not until 1746 did Charles Batteux separate the fine arts from the mechanical arts, and only in the last hundred years has such stress been laid on originality and personal expression. Must we then abandon the search for definitions, and look closer at social agreements and expectations? That would be a defeat for rationality, philosophers might feel, it being their role to arrive at clear, abstract statements that are true regardless of place or speaker. But perhaps (as Strawson and others have remarked) art may be one of those fundamental categories which cannot be analysed further, cannot be broken into more basic terms. And there is always Wittgenstein's scepticism about definitions — that terms commonly have a plexus of overlapping applications, meaning lying in the ways words are used, and not in any fiat of God or philosophers. {1}

Aesthetic Qualities

Suppose, to take Wittgenstein's scepticism further, we

dropped the search for definitions but looked to the characteristics of art, the effects and properties that were needed in large measure for something to establish itself as 'art'. What would they be? One would be beauty, surely — i.e. proportion, symmetry, order in variety that pleases. Beauty therefore comes down to feelings — not individual and transient feelings necessarily, but matters that ultimately cannot be rationalized? Yes, said David Hume and George Santayana. But then, said Wittgenstein, we should have to deny that aesthetic descriptions had any objectivity at all, which is surely untrue. We may not know whether to call some writing 'plodding' or simply 'slow-moving', but we don't call it 'energetic'. {1}

Very well, do we need to enquire further into beauty? Probably, since it is a term useful and universal. But contemporary philosophers have great difficulties in analysing the term properly — i.e. into abstract, freestanding propositions that are eternally true. Art certainly speaks to us down the ages, and we should like to think it was through a common notion of beauty. But look at examples. We revere the sculpture of fourth century Athens, but the Middle Ages did not. We prefer those marbles in their current white purity whereas in fact the Greeks painted them as garishly as fairground models. We cannot, it appears, ignore the context of art, and indeed have to show how the context contributes. Clearly, beauty is not made to a recipe, and if individual artworks have beauty, they do not exemplify some abstract notion of it. {1}

Dangers of Aesthetics

Poets have therefore been somewhat chary of aesthetics, feeling that poetry is too various and protean to conform to rules. Theory should not lead practice, they feel, but follow at a respectful distance. Put the cart before the horse and theory will more restrict than inform or inspire. Moreover professionals — those who live by words, and correspondingly have to make words live for them — are unimpressed by the cumbersome and opaque style of academia. Any directive couched in such language seems very dubious. For surely literature is not made according to rules, but the rules are deduced from literature — rationalized from good works of art to understand better what they have in common. And if theorists (philosophers, sociologists, linguists, etc.) do not have a strongly-developed aesthetic sense — which, alas, they often demonstrate — then their theories are simply beside the point. {1}

But theory need not be that way. Rather than prescribe it may clarify. No doubt, as Russell once wryly observed, philosophy starts by questioning what no one would seriously doubt, and ends in asserting what no one can believe, but creative literature is not without its own shortcomings. Much could be learnt by informed debate between the disciplines, and a willingness of parties to look through each other's spectacles. Obtuse and abstract as it

may be, philosophy does push doggedly on, arriving at viewpoints which illuminate some aspects of art. {1}

Art as Representation

What is the first task of art in any form? To represent. Yes, there is abstract painting, and music represents nothing unless it be feelings in symbolic form, but literature has always possessed an element of mimesis, copying, representation. Attempts are periodically made to purge literature of this matter-of-fact, utilitarian end — Persian mysticism, haiku evocation, *poésie pure*, etc. — but representation always returns. {1}

How is the representation achieved? No one supposes it is a simple matter, or that codes, complex social transactions, understandings between speakers, genre requirements etc. do not play a large if somewhat unfathomed part. Our understanding is always shaping our experiences, and there is no direct apperception of chair, table, apple in the simple-minded way that the Logical Positivists sometimes asserted. Words likewise do not stand in one-to-one relationships to objects, but belong to a community of relationships — are part, very often, of a dialogue that writing carries on with other writings. Even when we point and say 'that is a chair', a wealth of understandings underlies this simple action — most obviously in the grammar and behavioural expectations. The analytical schools have investigated truth and meaning to an extent unimaginable to the

philosophically untutored. They have tried to remove the figurative, and to represent matters in propositional language that verges on logic. Very technical procedures have been adopted to sidestep paradoxes, and a universal grammar has been proposed to explain and to some extent replace the ad hoc manner in which language is made and used. Thousands of man-lives have gone into these attempts, which aim essentially to fashion an ordered, logically transparent language that will clarify and possibly resolve the questions philosophers feel impelled to ask. {1}

Much has been learnt, and it would be uncharitable to call the enterprise a failure. Yet language has largely evaded capture in this way, and few philosophers now think the objectives are attainable. Even had the goals been gained, there would still have remained the task of mapping our figurative, everyday use of language onto this logically pure language. And of justifying the logic of that language, which is not a self-evident matter. There are many forms of logic, each with its strengths and limitations, and even mathematics, that most intellectually secure of human creations, suffers from lacunae, areas of overlap and uncertainties. But that is not a cause for despair. Or for embracing the irrationalism of the Poststructuralists who assert that language is a closed system — an endless web of word — associations, each interpretation no more justified than the next. But it does remind us that language becomes available to us through the medium in which it is formulated. And that literature of all types — written, spoken, colloquial,

formal — incorporates reality, but also partly reconstitutes it according to its own rules. {1}

Art as Emotional Expression

Suppose we return to simpler matters. Art is emotionally alive. We are delighted, elated, suffused with a bitter sweetness of sorrow, etc., rejecting as sterile anything which fails to move us. But are these the actual emotions that the artist has felt and sought to convey? It is difficult to know. Clearly we can't see into the minds of artists — not in the case of dead artists who have left no explanatory notes, and not generally in contemporary cases where artists find their feelings emerge in the making of the artwork. Then, secondly, we wouldn't measure the greatness of art by the intensity of emotion — unless we accept that a football match is a greater work of art than a Shakespeare play. And thirdly there is the inconvenient but well-known fact that artists work on 'happy' and 'sad' episodes simultaneously. They feel and shape the emotion generated by their work, but are not faithfully expressing some pre-existing emotion. {1}

Some theorists have in fact seen art more as an escape from feeling. Neurotic artists find their work therapeutic, and hope the disturbance and healing will also work its power on the audience. And if Aristotle famously spoke of the catharsis of tragedy, did he mean arousing emotions or releasing them — i.e. do artists express their own emotions

or evoke something appropriate from the audience? Most would say the latter since raw, truthful, sincere emotion is often very uncomfortable, as in the brute sex act or the TV appeal by distraught parents. Whatever the case, art is clearly a good deal more than emotional expression, and at least requires other features: full and sensitive representation, pleasing and appropriate form, significance and depth of content. {1}

Form and Beauty: Autonomy of Art

And so we come to form. Beauty we have glanced at, but if we drop that term, so troublesome and unfashionable today, there remains organization: internal consistency, coherence, a selection and shaping of elements to please us. And please us the art object must — genuinely, immediately, irrationally — by the very way it presents itself. How exactly? Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Croce, and dozens of contemporary philosophers have all made important contributions, but the variety of art makes generalization difficult, and explanations are naturally couched in the philosophic concerns of the time. {1}

But something can be said. Art presents itself as an autonomous, self-enclosing entity. The stage, picture frame, etc. give an aesthetic distance, tell us that what is shown or enacted serves no practical end, and is not to be judged so. We are drawn in — engrossed, enraptured — but we are also free to step back and admire the crafting, to exercise our

imagination, and to enjoy disinterestedly what can be more complete and vivid than real life. Is this autonomy necessary? Until the last century most artists and commentators said yes. They believed that harmony in variety, detachment, balance, luminous wholeness, organic coherence, interacting inevitability and a host of other aspects were important, perhaps amounting to a definition of poetry. Many contemporary poets do not. They seek to confront, engage in non-aesthetic ways with their public, to bring art out into the streets. Successfully, or so the trendier critics would persuade us, though the public remains sceptical. Modernism is taught in state schools, but Postmodernist has yet to win acceptance. {1}

Art as Purposeful Activity

Art, says the tax-paying citizen, is surely not entertainment, or not wholly so. Writers aim at some altruistic and larger purpose, or we should not fete them in the media and in academic publications. We don't want to be preached at, but artists reflect their times, which means that their productions give us the opportunity to see our surroundings more clearly, comprehensively and affectionately. And not only to see, say Marxist and politically-orientated commentators, but to change. Poets have very real responsibilities, perhaps even to fight male chauvinism, ethnic prejudice, third-world exploitation, believe the politically correct. {1}

Artist-Centred Philosophies

With the advent of psychology, and the means of examining the physiological processes of the human animal, one focus of attention has become the artist himself. Indeed, Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood felt that the work of art was created in the artist's mind, the transposing of it to paper or music or canvas being subsidiary and unimportant. But the transposing is for most artists the very nature of their art, and few conceive work completely and exactly beforehand. John Dewey stressed that knowledge was acquired through doing, and that the artist's intentions were both modified and inspired by the medium concerned. For Suzanne Langer the artist's feelings emerged with the forms of expression — which were not feelings expressed but ideas of feeling: part of a vast stock which the artist draws on, combines and modifies. Of course there is always something inexplicable, even magical, about good writing. It just came to me, says the writer: the words wrote themselves. That and the intertextuality of writing — that writing calls on and borrows from other pieces of writing, establishing itself within a community of understandings and conventions — led Roland Barthes to assert that the writer does not exist, that writing writes itself. {1}

Certainly writing is inextricably part of thinking, and we do not have something in our minds that we later clothe in words. But most writing needs shaping, reconsidering, rewriting, so that the author is not some passive, spiritualist

medium. Moreover, though we judge the finished work, and not the writer's intentions (supposing we could ever know them exactly) it is common knowledge that writers often have a small stock of themes which they constantly extract and rework: themes which are present in their earliest efforts and which do indeed reflect or draw substance from their experiences. Biography, social history, psychology do tell us something about artistic creations. {1}

Viewer-Centred Philosophies

Given that poets find themselves through their work, and do not know until afterwards what they had in mind, it may be wiser to look at art from the outside, from the viewer's perspective. We expect literature, for example, to hold something in the mind with particular sensitivity and exactness, and to hold it there by attention to the language in which it is formulated. Special criteria can apply. We feel terror and pity in the theatre, but are distanced, understanding that we don't need to call the police. We obey the requirements of genre and social expectations, making a speech on a public platform being very different from what we say casually to friends. We look for certain formal qualities in art — exactness, balance, vivid evocation, etc. — and expect these qualities to grow naturally from inside rather than be imposed from without. We realize that art produces a pleasure different from intellectual or sensuous one — unreflective enjoyment, but one also pregnant with important matters. Change one feature and we know

instinctively that something is wrong. {1}

How? Perhaps as we instinctively detect a lapse in grammar, by referring to tacit rules or codes. Nelson Goodman argued that art was essentially a system of denotation, a set of symbols, even a code that we unravel, the code arbitrary but made powerful by repeated practice. Edwin Panofsky suggested that symbols could be studied on three levels — iconic (the dog resembles a dog), iconographic (the dog stands for loyalty) or iconological (the dog represents some metaphysical claim about the reality of the physical world). Hence the importance of a wide understanding of the artist and his times. And why no appeals to good intentions, or to morally uplifting content, will reason us into liking something that does not really appeal. {1}

Art as Social Objects

But can we suppose that content doesn't matter? Not in the end. Art of the Third Reich and of communist Russia was often technically good, but we don't take it to our hearts. Marxist philosophers argue that art is the product of social conditions, and John Berger, for example, regarded oil paintings as commodities enshrining the values of a consumerist society. Hermeneutists argue that the art produced by societies allows them to understand themselves — so that we have devastating judgements skulking in the wartime portraits of Hitler, and in scenes of a toiling but grateful Russian proletariat. They are untrue in a way

obvious to everyone. {1}

But if society ultimately makes the judgements, who in society decides which artistic expressions it will commission and support? Not everyone. Appreciation requires experience and training, in making quality judgements, and in deciding the criteria. Some criteria can be variable (subject matter), some are standard (music is not painting) and some are decided by the history of the art or genre in question (paintings are static and two-dimensional). But additionally there are questions of authority and status. Institutionalists like George Dickie say simply that an object becomes art when approved sections of society confer that status on it. But that only shifts the question: how can we be sure such sections are not furthering their careers in the cosy world of money, media and hype? Ted Cohen could not really find such rituals of conferral, and Richard Wollheim wanted the reasons for such conferral: what were they exactly? Arthur Danto introduced the term 'artworld', but emphasize that successful candidates had to conform to current theories of art. Individual or arbitrary fiats were not persuasive. Those that see contemporary poetry as a country club, whose committee members are continually handing out prizes to each other, must concede that, nonetheless, there must rules and minimum requirements. {1}

But are there not more important considerations? However portrayed in the popular press, artists, writers and poets

lead hard lives, for the most part solitary, unrecognised and ill-rewarded. What drives them on? Vanity in part, and deep personal problems — plus, it may be, a wish to overcome feelings of inadequacy deriving from youth or the home background. But artists are not always more febrile or bohemian than others, or at least the evidence of them being so is open to question. When asked, artists usually speak of some desire to make sense of themselves and their surroundings. They feel a little apart from life, and do not understand why the public can skim over the surface, never troubling itself with the deep questions that cause elation, anguish and wonder. Literature, say writers, brings them experiences saturated with meaning, in which they perceive the fittingness of the world and their own place within it. The concepts of their own vision are inescapable theirs, and they can only hope these concepts are also important to the society from which they draw their support and inspiration.'

{1}

Evolution of Modernism

Modern poetry evolved by various routes. From Symbolism it took allusiveness in style and an interest in rarefied mental states. From Realism it borrowed an urban setting, and a willingness to break taboos. And from Romanticism came an artist-centred view, and retreat into irrationalism and hallucinations. No one would willingly lose the best that has been written in the last hundred years, but the present state of poetry suggests earlier doubts are coming home to roost.

Modernism's ruthless self-promotion has created intellectual

castes that cut themselves off from the hopes and joys of everyday life. Its poetry can be built on the flimsiest of foundations: Freudian psychiatry, verbal cleverness, individualism run riot, anti-realism, over-emphasis on the irrational. The concepts themselves are doubtful, and the supporting myths too small and self-admiring to show man in his fullest nature. Sales of early Modernist poetry books were laughably small, indeed, and it was largely after the Second World War, when the disciples of Modernism rose to positions of influence in the academic and publishing worlds, that Modernism came the lingua franca of the educated classes. The older generation of readers gradually died out. Literature for them was connoisseurship, a lifetime of deepening familiarity with authors who couldn't be analysed in critical theory, or packed into three-year undergraduate courses.

In Conclusion

One feature above all is striking in Modernism: experimentation, change for the sake of change, a need to be constantly at the cutting edge in technique and thought. {2} Perhaps this was understandable in a society itself changing rapidly. The First World War shattered many beliefs — in peaceful progress, international cooperation, the superiority of the European civilizations. It also outlawed a high-minded and heroic vocabulary: "gallant, manly, vanquish, fate", etc. could afterwards only be used in an ironic or jocular way. {3} But more fundamental was the nineteenth century growth in city life, in industrial employment, in universal literacy, in the power of mass

patronage and the vote. Science and society could evolve and innovate, so why not art?

But in its desire to retain intellectual ascendancy, art overlooked one crucial distinction. Science tests, improves and builds, but does not wantonly tear down. Extensive modification of established conceptions is difficult, and starting afresh in the manner of the Modernist artist would be unthinkable. There is simply too much to know and master, and the scientific community insists on certain apprenticeships and procedures. Originality is not prized in the way commonly supposed.

And must art represent its time? Not in any simple way. Very different artworks may originate in the same society at the same time — those of Hals and Rembrandt, for example. Art history naturally wishes to draw everything into its study but neither the appearance of great artists nor the direction of artistic trends seems predictable, any more than history is, and for similar reasons. Everything depends on the starting assumptions: what counts as important, and how that is assessed. Much the same can be said of economic theory. {4} The necessary are not the sufficient causes: certain factors may need to be present but they are not themselves sufficient to effect change.

No less than other practices, art begets art, with sometimes only a nodding acquaintance with the larger world it purports to represent or serve. Much writing and painting

from the early nineteenth-century days of Romanticism was frankly escapist, preferring the solitude of nature or the inner world of contemplation to the mundane business of socializing and earning a living. No doubt the shallow optimism, humbug and economic exploitation of the industrial revolution was very unattractive, but so then was rural poverty. Excepting the Georgians and some of the Auden generation, few poets of the last hundred years had first hand experience of the social issues of the day, and there are large areas of contemporary life even now that are not squarely treated: the world of work, public service, cultural differences, sexual experience. Either the literary prototypes do not exist, or writers would have to give up an individualist viewpoint and "dig out the facts" — i.e. write something closer to journalism. {5}

But the burning issues of the day pass and are soon forgotten. Art prides itself on its more fundamental qualities. If they did not have the time, training or intellectual powers to understand the contemporary world, artists would look for some shorter path to their subject matter. Hence the championing of the artist's viewpoint, on a vision unmediated by social understanding. Hence the appeal to (if not the understanding of) psychiatry, mythology and linguistics 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. {6}

Many techniques were used to distance language from its common uses, and assert its primary, self-validating status. And since proficiency in science and business requires a long, practical training, literature also insisted on study courses. Art is not for the profane majority, and its boundaries are carefully patrolled. Art may employ populist material or techniques, but it cannot be populist itself. Whatever its definition, art is outspokenly useless.

Modernist poets and critics do not regard the narrowly individual outlook a shortcoming, quite the opposite. Nineteenth-century realism was tainted with commerce and the circulating libraries. Twentieth-century realism all too blatantly takes the form of TV soaps and blockbuster novels. Only Marxists would advocate solidarity with the working classes, that poets should experience the hard world as it is for most of its inhabitants, that they should live everybody else.

The intellect has its demands and pleasures, but the learning of Modernists tends to be fragmentary, with ideas serving ulterior purposes, one of which is social distinction. There is a persistent strain of elitism in Modernism — sometimes breaking out in racism and contempt for the masses, sometimes retreating to arcane philosophy: idealism, existentialism, Poststructuralism. {7} Modernists are an aristocracy of the intellect. The cerebral is preferred. Modern dramatists and novelists may appeal to mythology, but their understanding is intellectualized: work is not crafted to

evoke the primal forces unleashed in plays by Euripides or or Racine, but shaped by concepts that serve for plot and structure.

And so on. Much more can be found in the Ocaso Press guides. As they stand, as simple introductions, I hope the essays on this site encourage readers to look beyond the current standards, to wonder whether the leading poets of the last century have not painted themselves into a corner by elevating dubious concepts over craft skills. No one wants a definition of poetry that excludes experimentation and originality but, just as there are standards in social life that keep communities peacefully operating together, standards that have been found by long centuries of trial and error to evade or suppress the more harmful aspects of our human natures, so there are communalities in poetry. In that respect, the literary past may not be dead, but a guide to what is still worth striving for.

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The Modern Literary Sensibility: A Brief History

Nonplussed at the contemporary scene in their popular survey of English poetry, Grierson and Smith declared they were not conscious of possessing that "modern sensibility" which the young poets arrogate to themselves and demand of their critics. {1}

What is the 'Modern Sensibility' in Poetry?

What that sensibility was, they did not profess to know, and that perplexity has persisted since. To some, 'modern sensibility', with reference to modern poetry, is what helps us the most to understand the true picture of the twentieth-century world we live in.' {2} Others stressed the many strands, literary, scientific and mythic, that make up contemporary outlooks, but point to the importance of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and the fragmented, dispiriting reality it depicted. {3} Perhaps the answer indeed lies in Eliot's own words: {4}

'I think that from Baudelaire I learned first, a precedent for the poetical possibilities, never developed by any poet writing in my own language, of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis, of the possibility of fusion between the sordid realistic and phantasmagoric, the possibility of the juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic. From him, as from Laforgue, I learned that the sort of material that I had, the sort of experience that an adolescent had

had, in an industrial city in America, could be the material for poetry; and that the source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic. That, in fact, the business of the poet was to make poetry out of the unexplored resources of the unpoetical; that the poet, in fact, was committed by his profession to turn the unpoetical into poetry.'

A Definition

Because novelty, the experimental and the unsentimental become more prominent in later poets, I will suggest that the 'modern sensibility' is a sustained attempt to widen poetry's remit — i.e. treat as suitable for poetry what was not so considered before, and — equally important — to outlaw themes and responses that were once considered appropriately 'poetic'. Avoidance can reach heroic levels. Peter Scupham's *Outing for the Handicapped Children*, comfortably mainstream, and now fifty years old, concludes with this stanza:

*They manage, patient; share with buns and fruit
A shaming kindness. Tamed, drowsy, separate,
We offer them our slow, unnatural smiles;
Tremble with intimations of their pains.
Now, as the day we gave, or stole, edges away,
The cool depths pull their faces from the light. {5}*

As is usual with English poetry of the period, the piece avoids stating the obvious, of making emotional capital out

of the circumstances. It's restrained, cool and effective. But it's also rather insubstantial, eluding the 'who, what, why, when, where and how' that journalism covers. Suppose, as a cub reporter, we submitted its equivalent in prose to our local newspaper editor. The last paragraph might run: They are patient, and manage to share their buns and fruit with an almost shaming kindness. Each seems tamed and drowsy, separate beings, to whom the caring staff offer their best smiles, as though complicit with their disabilities. Gradually, as the light went, we saw their faces fade into the cool depths of the water.

Back would come the piece, I suspect, with something like: 'Please develop into the usual human interest angle.' Yes, the larger context is missing. An older colleague might suggest:

It's an annual event, and one the children remember months afterwards. As the light faded, and they were readied for the coach journey back, one noticed them staring at the water, intent on their reflections, as though not understanding why they were so isolated, not like other normal children. 'Means a lot to them,' said Margery Stevens, the organizer, 'and to anyone with a drop of humanity in them.'

The Insubstantial Setting

It's this insubstantial setting that I'd like to explore first. Prose displaced verse as the preferred literary medium in the nineteenth century, and novels today are far more popular than poetry of any stripe — understandably, given

the novel's greater resources in plot, characterization, setting and social issues. But how has poetry reacted? Curiously, by turning away from these developments, sometimes to the extent of leaving us groping after any social setting or significance at all. The novelist will generally put readers in the picture within the first paragraph — 'So the Lord has given us a second Richard to rule this fractious realm, thought William Montacute, Earl of Salisbury, as he bent a knee in the shadowed abbey at Westminster. . . .' Or: 'The Pacific War was finally over, and back to our small Oklahoma farm came my dear, loving and impossible husband' Equally clear would be opening sentences like: 'The revolver felt heavy, but the trigger was well oiled. . . . Whatever else could be said of him, Hubert Dreaver was a responsible man. . . . When I think of Aunt Jayne's house, across the foothills of memory, and go up the unpainted steps. . . . Bernstein was my best friend. . . . Open Day is not a favourite on any Head Teacher's calendar'

We know where we are immediately, and what to expect. But the Peter Scuphampiece quoted earlier needs the title to tell us what's going on. Even the last line is a little baffling: 'The cool depths pull their faces from the light.' Just the light fading? Suicidal? Being locked away again from public awareness?

Modern Poetry

Perhaps all three. Poetry's ability to say more than is immediately evident is one reason for reading it, and a more generalizing and/or transcendental quality was certainly an

expected feature of earlier poetry, before the 'modern sensibility' took hold. Now poems are much more 'restricted', limited to a mundane event or series of observations. Yet Eliot's 'fusion between the sordid realistic and phantasmagoric' has created a strange animal. Certainly a conclusion or moral can be drawn, but it's usually more to round off the piece than serve as the animating reason for the poem's existence. Observations are made in a fresh, sharp and engaging manner; a few reflections are woven in; a generalizing comment pulls the piece together.

Most of the 83 poems featuring in Thwaite and Mole's survey of (British) Poetry 1945 to 1980 {6} adopt this approach, and some 67 need their titles to make their modest and sometimes inconsequential sense. Verse craft is restrained. Most lines are halfway to prose, in fact, and don't call attention to themselves.

That inconsequential nature grows more obvious in later poetry, and little in Hulse, Kennedy and Morley's collection of 1993 would count as poetry to a pre-war generation. {7} Most poems are prose, a rather unadventurous and badly-written prose, moreover, though the Introduction claims otherwise.

We believe the poetry collected here confirms what William Scammell has described as "a flourishing contemporary poetic culture with something of the brio and ambition once thought lost to the novel and to more exciting poets

*abroad." The new poetry emphasizes accessibility, democracy and responsiveness, humour and seriousness, and reaffirms the art's significance as public utterances. The new poetry highlights the beginning of the end of British poetry's tribal divisions and isolation, and a new cohesiveness — its constituent parts "talk" to one another readily, eloquently, and freely while preserving their unique identities. Thirty years ago, A. Alvarez published his pioneering anthology *The New Poetry*. We make no apology for using his title for an anthology of poetry that is fresh in its attitudes, risk-taking in its address and plural in its forms and voices.*

Readers will have to make their own minds about this mission statement, but to me only a few poems by Eavan Boland, Paul Durcan, Michael Donaghy, Carol Ann Duffy, Michael Hulse, Fred D'Aguiar, Sebastian Barry, Frank Kuppner and Simon Armitage, make the grade, i.e. only in 9 of the 55 British poets featured. {8} I look briefly at three poems.

Carole Ann Duffy's *Adultery* evokes the radiance and guilt of an illicit affair. {8} Stanza 2/3 is conventional enough with its portrayal of increased desire and vulnerability:

Now

you are naked under your clothes all day,

But then comes the withering:

Slim with deceit.

Why is this so effective? Perhaps it is the several levels of meaning: a. The speaker, now a desirable woman again, imagines the figure she possessed before her marriage became so humdrum. b. Just as the relationship is based on deceit, so is the image the speaker holds of herself. She is not slim, and the body, vibrant beneath the clothes, is flagrantly other than it appears. c. Slim applies to the affair — being only for sex, the relationship lacks the acceptance and fullness of a proper liaison. d. With deceit hints at the social cost of the deception, that the subterfuge demeans her, and reduces the sexual enjoyment. e. Slim suggests concentration, that the sexual organs are ravenous, focused on their own appetites. f. The phrase — with its overtones of trim, brief, concealment, seat, etc. — creates a visual embodiment of the pudenda. After the sexual largess of naked under your clothes all day the verse tapers down into neat, wry impression of what is only flimsily hidden from view. In short, a compressed imagery, which releases its meaning slowly.

Michael Hulse's *The Country of Pain and Redemption* ends with:

He learns to say yes, say yes, and goes
home to a lighted house, a dazzle of
horror, security, darkness and love.

What could be more complete? But this is not the usual reaction to an accepted proposal of marriage. The young man is dying, the victim of a car crash or terrorist bomb. The proposal is being made to him by his lover, who is now cradling his head and extracting some keepsake from these wrecked hopes. The lighted house is heaven or hell or the end of things. Note how wonderfully apt is dazzle — the sharpness of the image, its purely sensory nature, the bewilderment of things dark and light. The extended image gathers force as the poem comes strikingly to an end.

Crinkle, near Birr is a dangerous poem. Paul Durcan starts with

Daddy and I were lovers,

and ends with

I lay on my back in the waters of his silence,
The silence of a diffident, chivalrous bridegroom,
And he carried me in his two hands home to bed.

Is this incest, the boy's thoughts only, or a comment on the sexual nature of father-son bonding? There are hints of all three, but the poem is more an extended metaphor of boyhood love, which does not shy away from taboo aspects. An uncomfortable poem (as was Durcan's boyhood {9-10}), but one with lines of shining accomplishment — we spawned

our own selves in our hotel bedroom ... the quality of his silence when he was happy — again achieved by the compelling imagery. No one supposes that these views are edifying, or adequate to the full experience of sex or love. The poems are only partial successes on other grounds, moreover. These examples of imagery in poetry are a powerful means to thinking, and allow literature to explore what pulp fiction serves up as stock responses.

But, even here, much only works partially. Carol Ann Duffy's opening stanzas are not sufficiently precise and telling:

Wear dark glasses in the rain.
Regard what was unhurt
as though through a bruise. (a)
Guilt. A sick green tint. (b)
New gloves, money tucked in the palms,
the handshake crackles (c) Hands
can do many things. Phone.
Open the wine. Wash themselves. (d)

a. is a mismatch of social registers. b is not saved from cliché by 'sick'. c. 'crackle' is not the right word. d. is not telling us anything important, or adding to the plot. Thereafter, following stanza 3, success is very mixed, with the excellent A telltale clock / wiping the hours from its face / on a white sheet gasping, radiant, yes followed by Pay for it in cash, fiction, cab-fares back/ to the life that crumbles like a wedding cake which is only reportage, staccato

observations that don't engender emotion, or are too clever (wedding cake). Even the distancing feature that ends the poem (That was / the wrong verb. This is only an abstract noun) doesn't make the self-denial convincing.

Michael Hulse's poem makes fewer errors but takes seven stanzas to set the scene, starting:

The woman sitting on the glinting barrier
watching a stir of wind relentlessly uplift
 the silver undersides of leaves
is breathing very carefully, as if
afraid that she might be too tender for breathing.
Her hand is resting on the dusty hair of the
 man lying jack-knifed on the grass
between the glittering strips of metal
that run down the center reserve.

Does the central barrier glitter: isn't it generally finished in a non-reflective material? And to what advantage is glitter emphasized? afraid that she might be too tender for breathing seems to be two statements run together: the woman is breathing with difficulty because horrified by the 'accident', and because she's afraid her breathing might injure the casualty further. jack-knifed is an image of violence, underlined by glittering again, but the inert body is not inherently threatening.

Then comes a digression:

Again the country
of pain and revelation has a guest.

Which is then inflated to portentous dimensions, but has
nothing particular to say:

Again the great light has ground the peaks to powder.
Again in the valleys the shadows have sheltered
the traveler standing inert
at the rail of the ferry, the trader
Bargaining with the goatherd, and the trapper, still
and meticulous in his secretive sidelight.

It is the discovered country
from which, returning in wonder as if,

from memories of dreams we thought forgotten
we sunder in awe, wanting.

Paul Durcan's poem is very much more successful, all
through, probably because the narrative bubbles with
anecdotes and telling detail:

We went on our honeymoon
To Galway, the City of the Tribes.

When Daddy bowled, I was his wicketkeeper.
He fancied himself as Ray Lindwall
And I fancied myself as Godfrey Evans.

Daddy divided the human race
into those that had fire escapes and spoke Irish
And those who had not got fire escapes and did not speak
Irish.

But it's not simply a narrative, i.e. the poem doesn't succeed
by not attempting too much, but by pushing the narrative
into areas resonant with darker or more mysterious matters:

Another night we sat in a kitchen in Furbo
With a schoolteacher hobnobbing in Irish
Exotic as Urdu, all that night and rain at the windowpane.

And:

When I was twelve I obtained a silent divorce.

Put another way, poetry today draws on a prose heritage
rather than on traditional verse, and is most careful not to
lose that street-fighting edge by over-shaping with verse
techniques. Unthinkable today is the saying of the Indian
continent, that prose is the plant but poetry is its flower.
More importantly, the poetry deliberately neglects or evades
the elements of story-telling taught in elementary creative
writing courses because it wishes to strike out on different
routes.

Nor does the contemporary poem draw on the cinematic,
which generally starts at some exciting point in the story. A

spectacular bank heist. A drugs swap in a seedy nightclub. The schoolchild reluctantly going up the stairs to her stepfather's flat. The body being weighted and dropped into the canal. The farewell party at the corporate headquarters. The oily water derelict unloading facilities. And so on, all telling the viewer what needs to be known: the genre, the period, the setting, and the intended audience. {11}

Modern Sensibility in Later Poetry

Later poetry, to judge from *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, seems even more fragmentary, and often lacks: {12}

1. Something worth saying.
2. An overall shaping where each pause, word, phrase and sentence has the right place in the poem, each line leading naturally to the next and developing the theme further.
3. An 'inevitability' of phrasing, with the word combinations appearing unexpected but apt and memorable on reflection.
4. A close attention to the sound of the words, with those phonetic patternings and half echoes that make a line or phrase pleasing by its auditory qualities alone.

No doubt poetry today, or the serious poetry published in leading magazines, has other aims. As David Caplan remarks: the plurality of alternatives that contemporary poets encounter has destabilized our sense of acceptable options. A circumstance that makes the poets' formal choices nearly impossible to anticipate. In other words: forget what you know. We've been invited to a game held

together by a set of rules that are self-devised, unique, complex and subject to instant change. {12}

'Making the rules up as they go along' often extends into the writing process itself, where spontaneity is admired and preserved. In recent interview, Billy Collins had this to say: {13} I try to write very fast. I don't revise very much. I write the poem in one sitting. Just let it rip. It's usually over in twenty to forty minutes. I'll go back and tinker with a word or two, change a line for some metrical reason weeks later, but I try to get the whole thing just done. Most of these poems have a kind of rhetorical momentum. If the whole thing doesn't come out at once, it doesn't come out at all. I just pitch it. I imagine many poets do something similar, but do they publish everything, even if the result is banal or unambitious? {14} Spontaneous writing was a favourite pastime of surrealist poets, but not much of their work is read today, or was then, very probably, outside their particular coteries.

William Logan, in particular, has been scathing of contemporary poetry {15} and an Amazon reviewer of his *Another Country* remarked:

Poetry is the only art form in America that I can think of that no longer has a bracing tradition of real criticism. Novels, plays, films, operas . . . we expect critics to note honestly whatever flaws and failures they see in specific works. Critical reviews often hurt box offices and egos, but without

them an art atrophies. . . To see if Logan's reviews are memorable, startling, and true for you, you can sample them at the web site of The New Criterion, but you might as well get this book now and dip into it now and again as a tonic against the hushed reverence that too often greets bland, lazy or meretricious poetry.

Modern Sensibility in Contemporary Poetry

But it's pointless to judge a work of art on what it doesn't intend to give, and a few hours spent on The Poetry Foundation site suggests that poems of the last decade:
{16}

1. Use rhyme rarely — generally in New Formalist work, or in a loose, jovial way:

To the Metropolitan Police Force, London:
the asylum gates are locked and chained, but undone
by wandering thoughts and the close study of maps.
So from San Francisco, patron city of tramps,

2. Employ very free verse styles. Some work exhibits a keen ear for timing and line break:

All dark morning long the clouds are rising slowly up
beneath us, and we are fast asleep.
The mountains unmove
intensely. And so do we. Meadows
look down.

But more is looser:

The sun is warm, the sky is clear,
etc.... Quickly he taps
a full nib twice to the mouth of
his japan-ink bowl—harder than
he had thought, if he had thought—smears
the fine spattering with his sleeve,
and continues, for whom haste is
more purity than certainty,
as anarchy is better than despotism—

Or clearly prose:

My father had a steel comb with which he would comb our
hair.

After a bath the cold metal soothing against my scalp, his
hand cupping my chin.

My mother had a red pullover with a little yellow duck
embroidered

on it and a pendant made from a gold Victoria coronation
coin.

3. Pay little or no attention to cadence or patterning by
sound and white space.

4. Pack little of an emotional punch. Most of the better
poems today are intriguing, clever and self-knowing.

And the house, the mansion he
grew up in, soon a lawyer will pass
a key across a walnut desk, but even this
lawyer will not be able to tell me where this
mansion is. And my father's masterpieces, his
many novels, mine
now to publish—I don't have to tell anyone
I didn't write them, not a word.

5. Either avoid the great human commonplaces like love,
hope, separation, etc. (which are left to amateur poetry) or
cover them obliquely, in a detached and/or novel way.

I think I always liked the game
because it sounded like my name
combined with the concept of alone.
(My name really does mean 'alone'
in Slovenian!) We don't actually care
if it's true, but we want to know
the person telling us is telling us
the truth.

6. Sometimes use vibrant or surreal images:

The sun is an indistinct moon. Frail sticks
of grass poke her ankles,
and a wet froth of spiders touches her legs
like wet fingers. The musk and smell
of air are as hot as the savory

terrible exhales from a tired horse.

7. Are rarely written from a committed political stance, probably because dissident views can hurt careers.

Free Verse Orthodoxy

Free verse no doubt became the preferred medium of poets in or supported by academia — most serious poets today — because free verse could be written regularly and generate suitable material for critical study. Hank Lazer's recent survey of the current American poetry scene {17} is prefaced by a quote from Jed Rasula: The fact is that virtually all poetry is now under some kind of institutional supervision. The poetry referred to is serious poetry, of course, the more demanding literary productions supported by grants, university study, literary magazines and the more discerning newspapers.

Support for Poetry in USA and UK

But there is no shortage of support for what's become a minority interest. Poets & Writers lists more than 9,100 certified authors, and claims that each issue reaches 80,000 writers. Workshops are growing in popularity and, according to AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs), now number 852. The AWP itself offers services to over 34,000 writers, 500 member colleges and universities and 100 writers' conferences and centres. Many such courses are held in attractive, holiday-like locations and boast celebrity poets as instructors.

Equally diverse and numerous are the products of the literary institutions. Representing the period 1990 to 2006, Poetry House has shelved over 20,000 non-vanity press volumes of poetry. Bowker reports 37,450 poetry and drama titles between 1993 and 2006. Amazon was listing 1,971 new titles under the category of poetry in 2009. A typical print run for a small press poetry book is 200 to 1000 copies. Less than 0.5% sell more than a thousand copies or go into a second printing. The boundaries between vanity presses, self-publication, online publication, print-on-demand and refereed publication have become blurred, and some small presses are reciprocal arrangements to publish the work of friends.

United States sees funding from state, federal and local agencies, plus foundations, prizes, literary retreats, and tenure in universities as writers in residence. Tens of thousands of poetry readings are held each year, and more poets publish in books, magazines and websites than ever before. There are 200 odd graduate creative writing courses, and many more undergraduate courses, so that some 2000 university-accredited poets are turned out yearly (making the academic rat-race, fierce in most disciplines even fiercer here). Twenty-five indeed of the US States have poet laureates. Poets appear as personalities in increasing numbers of biographies, and they feature widely in Nobel Prizes.

That symbiosis of serious poetry, academia and funding institutions is also prevalent in England, and encourages a

similar consistency of style. As a registered charity, The Poetry Society advises, helps and promotes poetry at all levels of the UK's academic and cultural life. In comfortable surroundings on the fifth floor of the Royal Festival Hall on London's South Bank, the National Poetry Library provides a working space, helpful staff and a vast collection of books and magazines — practically all the poetry books produced in English in the twentieth century. The larger publishing houses have their new titles, and publishers like Bloodaxe, Carcanet and Peterloo concentrate on poetry, much of it written by unfamiliar or foreign names. On radio and television every year appears the Annual Poetry Day, and each month there are poetry competitions, either as adjuncts to prestigious arts festivals, or run by the small presses.

Clearly, the prosaic nature of poetry today does not stem from funding difficulties, but possibly because Modernism, which liberated and deepened poetry for half a century, is going the way of most revolutions, hardening into a free verse orthodoxy that alone gives authenticity.

Reading Between the Lines: Critical Input

I have outlined aspects of the 'modern sensibility' manifest in poetry over the last century, but there is an equally important aspect. The poetry doesn't stand on its own feet but is elaborately buttressed and interpenetrated by literary criticism, by other poets' appreciative articles, and by the wider reaches of critical theory. That is why Modernism so flagrantly flouts journalistic and story-telling conventions, I

suggest, because those conventions would restrict input from supporting disciplines, self-referencing and circular arguments though many are. The pattern was indeed set quite early. Lionel Trilling, a widely read and respected literary critic of the post-war period, said of Robert Frost: {18}

So radical a work, I need scarcely say, is not carried out by reassurance, nor by the affirmation of old virtues and pieties. It is carried out by the representation of the terrible actualities of life in a new way. I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet... The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called Design and see if you sleep the better for it. Read Neither out Far nor in Deep, which often seems to me the most perfect poem of our time, and see if you are warmed by anything in it except the energy with which emptiness is perceived... talk of the disintegration and sloughing off of the old consciousness!

Frost does not depict the outward events and scenery of urban life, but the central facts of twentieth century experience, the uncertainty and painful sense of loss, are there and seem, if nothing more bleakly apparent in that their social and economic manifestations have been stripped away. Frost may not depict the scenery of modern life — its chimneys and factories, its railways, and automobiles, but he certainly deals with the basic problems and the basic facts of modern life. The ache of modernism finds its fullest expression in his poetry. The modern note of frustration,

loneliness, isolation and disillusionment is often struck.

But when we turn to *Neither Out Far Nor In Deep* {19} we find a rather obvious content, a sing-song rhythm and unadventurous rhyming:

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass
A ship keeps raising its hull;
The wetter ground like glass
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
But wherever the truth may be —
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

Poets and editors have their off-days, but Trilling was a leading and influential critic. Yes, of course, we can read deep meaning into this banality if we wish: {20}

As the final stanzas make dramatically clear, they [i.e. people, observers] are wasting away their lives in meaningless quest; for whatever it is and wherever it might be, "the truth" is surely not here. In short, they can look "Neither Far Out Nor In Deep". There is an implicit allegory expressing Frost's anger against the poets and philosophers who have wasted life in all times and places in futile searches of the ultimate reality.

But do we have to? Is that last statement true, and does this not make poetry a somewhat pointless enterprise? {21} What has happened to that Augustan aim of poetry, of producing 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.' And wasn't the poet was expected to say, by means varying with the period and its schools of poetry, what ordinary prose couldn't?

Not today. Modern poetry is not written for the common reader, but for critics and fellow poets. It is purposely made fragmental, difficult and non-sequential, avoiding the crafts of journalism and story-telling in favour of speculative literary theory. Other articles of this site have suggested how limited and aberrant can be truth, meaning and aesthetics of that theory, {22} and here I will simply review one poem characteristic of many. A section of Christopher Middleton's poem *Reflections on a Viking Prow in Bolshevism in Art* and other expository writings (Carcanet Press, 1978) runs:

The regard resting on the object . . . the key to self-affirmation: a self reclaims itself from nonentity and, as the object reveals itself in a certain light, that self can gaze into its own depths as an agent of interiority . . . Between 'I am' and 'This is' there can be strange ligatures — a magico-grammatical tissue links first and third persons singular.

And Neil Corcoran's explication runs: *Middleton's own ligature 'magico-grammatical' may imply that there is a kind of nostalgia in him, despite his explicit disclaimers, for a lost divinity. The vanished god leaves sacramental traces in the world to be reclaimed by the text in a kind of late Platonic semiotics; the god may be brought down or back by a calling-forth of disregarded but still immanent spirits. Officially, however, this new relation is turned not towards theology but towards a ludic politics. The poem effects a revision of attitudes by subverting cliché and stereotype; it 'infuriates the world into showing its hand'. For Middleton, poetry is a 'limit to enslavement' and thereby 'exigent': 'I decipher the dreams of the victims who have no chance to speak'. {23}*

Corcoran places Christopher Middleton's work in its broader setting, classifying it as a variety of Neo-Modernism. Much in

the five pages devoted to the artist is exactly stated, though perhaps couched in more radical terminology than needed: the poem is straightforward, and we don't know whether the late Platonic refers to our world or the tail-end of the classical world that the Viking invasions helped to destroy. But my interest is in what is being read into the poem, which seems more than its text supports. The intention cannot be to clarify — it doesn't — but to thicken the poem's significance and contemporary relevance. The commentary has echoes of Heidegger (showing its hand), Structuralism (semiotics) and Barthes (subverting), which the poetry does not.

Concluding Thoughts

I have suggested that the modern sensibility entails two elements. The first is a move to both widen poetry's remit to include the 'non-poetical' and narrow it to exclude what has hitherto been poetry, both in subject and treatment, i.e. to continually shift the goal-posts of what's acceptable. The second is to make poetry deliberately difficult, fragmented and allusive, so that its explication by critics, poets and theorists becomes part of the subject matter.

Both are extraordinary positions to adopt. It is as though contemporary mathematics, having made great strides in topology and number theory, should now be banned from these fields. Or that ready application, i.e. its simple use by engineers, earns a black mark. Popularity smacks of the second rate, and while anyone who knows the English Home Countries might grin at: {24}

Miss J. Hunter Dunn, Miss J. Hunter Dunn,
Furnish'd and burnish'd by Aldershot sun,
What strenuous singles we played after tea,
We in the tournament — you against me!

the congnoscenti should know better. Simply deplorable were the wide sales of John Betjeman's Collected Poems, dismissed as 'Victorian' by the poetry establishment of the time, which went on to exceed two million copies.

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Modernist Poetry Discontents

'Make it new', said Ezra Pound, and twentieth-century poetry successively discarded a need to speak to the common man (Symbolism), to represent truth (High Modernism/New Criticism) to bear witness (Imagism), to make sense (Surrealism, Dada) or use the law courts of language (Postmodernism).

Each purge produced a poetry thinner and more fractious than before, which sharpened the need for even more extreme measures. Purity of abstruse doctrine became the aim of poetry, which insensibly merged with literary criticism and then theory. As the doctrine moved the goal-posts, progressively shrinking the acceptable, what was left to poetry became of interest only to small circles of like-minded poets. Maurice Manning's 'Where Sadness Comes From', with its hints of Southern lynching parties, is typical of today's work. {1} The opening lines:

*Don't go back to say it came from way
back when. It did, it did, but now.*

*When you said did just now did you feel
a little dip, a curtsey in*

*the middle of the word, almost
another syllable but*

not quite? We like to say a word,

a single word can make us feel.

*There, there it is again, this time
a falling down at the end of □feel.*

*I'm here to tell you I come from
a place where hanging used to happen:*

It's a deftly-written and intriguing reflection on the uses of language, but also one that remains rather theoretical, bloodless and elusive. Think how more rewarding would be a series of poems that got to the heart of the matter, and which, as journalists put it, actually 'named and shamed' the perpetrators, and the attitudes responsible.

To return to generalities: the successive poetry movements resulted in a local thickening as one aspect or another was taken up, but also an overall impoverishment of theme and language, with poetry dividing into coterie groups, each claiming the sole truth. Pathologists would call this a cancer, the growth of enlarged cells at the expense of the body as a whole, suggesting (as Marxists would argue) that modern literature is sick because the product of a sick society. Far from denoting more sincere and adventurous thinking, therefore, contemporary poetry may be irrational in the way documented by Pankaj Miskra's 'Age of Anger: A History of the Present'. {1} Just as Romanticism championed a more hopeful view of man, and Symbolism fled the daily grind of earning a living, so Modernism today reflects unresolved

conflicts in a world of increasing alienation and uncertainty. A large literature touches tangentially on this issue. {3-13}

Death of Truth

Pride in country and community, a wish to explore, develop and identify with the aspirations of one's fellow citizens, an abiding interest in the larger political and social issues of the day and a commitment to the moral and religious qualities that distinguish man from brute animals are all aspects of modern democratic life, but they find scant expression in its poetry. Wordsworth's broodings on the ineffable are preferred to his patriotic odes, and Swinburne's urgent rhetoric is no more read today than William Watson's high-minded effusions. Even the Georgians with their innocent depictions of country life were decried by the Moderns, though what was substituted was a good deal less real and relevant to the book-buying public. The New Criticism ushered in by Pound and Eliot, finding in the admired poetry of the past so much that was no longer true, declared that truth was not to be looked for in poetry. All that mattered were the words on the page, and the ingenious skill with which they deployed. The experience of historians was set aside, as was indeed that of readers of historical romances, both of whom can remain happily suspended between the past and present.

Rejection of the Past

Challenge is healthy, but the new practitioners rewrote the rules altogether. Poetry had always been contemporary, they argued, and that now meant being direct, personal and

American. Poetry had in fact been more than that, but the proponents of popular Modernism — William Carlos Williams, the Black Mountain School, Beat Poets and the San Franciscans — had answers ready. Poetry must be unmediated if sincere, and the techniques of verse were a handicap to expression. They remembered Pound's dictum, and asserted that a more democratic age must have a more democratic poetry. And lest anyone think their work trivial, they wrapped matters up in a complex phraseology, redefining the elements of verse in startling ways. Theoretical scaffolding became a necessary part of contemporary poetry, the more so as the floodgates were soon to be opened in schools and writing classes throughout the country. Excellence lay in what authorities could be quoted, and the theoretical considerations accessible in a poem.

Civil War

Once academic careers could be carved from contemporary poetry, critics proselytised for their movements, seeking to place candidates in the apostolic succession from the founding fathers, who were de facto great poets. Some ingenuity was needed to make Hardy and Yeats into Modernists, and even more to shield Frost from the sort of criticism that damaged the enemy, but academics dug deeper into the fissile nature of language. They researched the bases of criticism, and developed a literary theory based on continental philosophy. Unless we think the critical studies unbalanced, or that they adjusted the criteria according to the poet or movement under consideration, we

have to accept that there are now no common values, only a civil war between communities who choose not to understand each other.

First some uncomfortable facts. British poetry declined in importance from the eighteenth century, and had ceased to be the most important literary genre by the mid nineteenth. From the end of that century to the 1930s, only some 15 poetry books of any significance were published each year in England. Seventy percent of borrowings from public libraries were prose fiction, and not much of the remaining thirty percent was poetry. The 10,000 copies subscribed before publication of a new volume by Stephen Phillips were a publishing phenomenon, but still only a tenth of those achieved by Lorna Doone in 1897.

General periodicals like *The Cornhill*, *The Nineteenth Century*, *Longmans and Murray's Magazine* published a little poetry, and new literary magazines like *The Yellow Book* generally had limited circulations and short lives. Poets could support themselves on their poetry even less than they do today, there being no poets in residence, public readings or interviews on the radio and TV. What did spring up were coteries of poets and writers, more in England than the USA, and particularly in London. There were the usual disagreements but the Moderns were not personally at odds with the Georgians: they mixed with them socially and found much to admire in their work. Pound was asked to contribute to *Georgian Poetry*, and Eliot's poetry was liked

by Munro and others. That coterie world continues to this day:

'Let me be specific as to what I mean by "official verse culture" — I am referring to the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of The New York Times, The Nation, The American Poetry Review, The New York Review of Books, The New Yorker, Poetry (Chicago), Antaeus, Parnassus, Atheneum Press, all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all of the major university presses (the University of California Press being a significant exception at present). Add to this the ideologically motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university, writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through prizes and awards judged by these same individuals. Finally, there are the self-appointed keepers of the gate, who actively put forward biased, narrowly focused and frequently shrill and contentious accounts of American poetry, while claiming, like all disinformation propaganda, to be giving historical or nonpartisan views. In this category, the American Academy of Poetry and such books as The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing stand out.'

Those coteries later became university-based. In 'Scrutiny', F.R. Leavis applied the approaches of T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards and William Empson in a more sustained manner.

'For Leavis and his followers, analysis was not merely a technique for precise description of literature, but a process whereby the reader could "cultivate awareness", and grow towards the unified sensibility. Analysis was necessary because a poem resulted from a complex of associated feelings and thoughts. A great poem was not a simple, forceful statement of some well-known experience, "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd", but a profoundly original creation only fully comprehended after close textual analysis. Because of these attitudes, the practical critic spent his time discovering complexities, ambiguities and multiplications of meaning. He was attracted to irony and wit, because a poem with these qualities offers different layers of effect for interpretation. Long, discursive poems, such as Paradise Lost, which depend for much of their organisation on rational analysis, were undervalued, and the critics tended to treat all poems, and even plays and novels, as akin to lyric poetry in their structure of imagery.'

Yet many critics disliked the approach. 'Helen Gardner and C. S. Lewis have pointed out that a student can be taught a technique of analysis, and do well in examinations, without any real appreciation of poetry whatsoever.' But poets kept up the running.

'Literary critics are rarely under fire and never tested by the high seas of artistic creation. Instead, as John Updike puts it when titling his own collected essays and reviews, they "hug

the shoreline" of accepted practices and ideals. Their potshots are taken from behind the cover of their age's standards, and the long progress of the history of ideas.'

Modernism was a jealous god, moreover, and imposed standards of its own. We probably understand Hardy, for example, better through biography than his poetry or novels, and no doubt all poets would be closer to us if textbooks included their less admirable aspects: Hardy's misogyny, Yeats's calculated affectations, Eliot's ambition that encouraged his wife's association with Russell but had her committed when his career was threatened, Pound's philandering and anti-Semitism, and so forth.

So what happened to the broad church of Modernism? Perhaps there never was a movement as such, but only poets reacting in their own ways to individual circumstances. Perhaps poets remained unconvinced by the theory created to help them, finding it abstruse and over-ingenious: many are the stories of Eliot bemused and chuckling over Ph.D. theses on his work.

But the literary scholar's task is perhaps not to review, which is a matter for the small presses and their endless squabbles, but, firstly, to explain and find an audience for the poet or poets under study. Then, secondly, came research into the bases of criticism, recreating literary theory and its contemporary philosophy. Thirdly, literary scholars sought to dethrone the elitist and monolithic

criticism of the past, replacing its lofty and supposedly universal standards by something more democratic and individual.

New is Better

Axiomatic in many books and articles is that poetry must move on, that newer is necessarily better, an assertion clearly at odds with the historical record. Did Aeschylus, Euripides or Sophocles improve on Homer, and did the Alexandrians improve on those playwrights? Antiquity did not think so. Did the Latin poets of the Silver Age improve on Virgil, Lucretius or Catullus? Again the answer is obvious, and European poetry did not achieve real splendour again until the Renaissance. Sanskrit literature saw a great flowering in Kalidasa and Bhartrihari, both of whom wrote with moving simplicity, and then grew increasingly clever and ornate until it became unreadable to all but a small caste. The great poetry of the Chinese was written in the Tang dynasty, and these poems were still serving as models a thousand years later. No one has written better Arabic than al Muttanabbi or better Persian poetry than Ferdowsi or Rumi. We don't have to believe in Spengler's or Toynbee's cycles of history to see how assiduously the second-rate has been promoted as answering to contemporary needs. Science, industry, governance and host of other disciplines do make progress, but the arts deal with the more permanent aspects of human nature.

Whenever there is evidence to judge, we find that great poets develop, widening their themes and improving

technique so as to deal with more taxing themes. In general, however, the Moderns have not developed in this way, but simply switched from one approach to another. Lowell's confessional mode may have been a relief from his high formalism phase, but the poetry wasn't better. Larkin, Hughes, Hill, Ginsberg, Merrill, Heaney and others have not become more accomplished, but somewhat repeated themselves: distinctive work, but not sufficient to place their books on our favourites bookshelf.

'It is almost now a standard chapter of a poet's life that she or he describe some struggle and eventual emancipation from the constraints of form or the confines of a particular verse-genre or critical ideology, whether imagism, formalism, new-formalism, new criticism, or the local dogmas of a university workshop.'

'Timothy Steele in his book *Missing Measures* has traced the process by which the understanding that poetry was something more than language arranged metrically turned into the belief that poetry was something quite other than language arranged metrically, and meter, which until the late nineteenth century had been a sine qua non of poetry, was thrown out of the window. The same thing seems to have happened to paraphrasable meaning: the recognition that poetry was something more than its language's paraphrasable meaning has become the dogma that paraphrasable meaning is unpoetic, or at least that a poem approaches the poetic in so far as it is unparaphrasable. This

would have been a very weird doctrine to anyone before 1800, and to almost anyone before 1900 (that is, in those now almost unimaginable days when large numbers of people besides poets bought, read, and cared about poetry). Even Coleridge, who was hardly the most stalwart advocate of poetic clarity, is on record as saying (in his Table Talk) 'Poetry is certainly something more than good sense, but it must be good sense at all events; just as a palace is more than a house, but it must be a house, at least.'

Propaganda

Many features of contemporary poetry are those of a failed state: a country of revolution and civil war, assailed by corruption and ever-increasing emergency measures, where an intelligentsia without experience of life or any skill beyond writing a dense prose bristling with non sequiturs controls the media, where new developments are referred back to the writings of the founding fathers whose inspiring struggles for liberty make the foundations of its citizen's training programme, where the government proclaims an age of universal plenty invisible to its inhabitants or to those in surrounding countries, and where all offers of outside aid are rejected as attempts to suborn the inviolable integrity of the state.

But how could such a 'failed state' view, so at odds with the inspiring view fostered by the poetry press and mainstream media, be anything like the truth?

Because the media — all media — are quietly managed, and

have to be. Thomas Jefferson may well have said that the public's right to know the facts they need to govern themselves is more important than the official's right to govern, but realists (or realists with no high hopes of human nature) generally see survival as the first duty of a state — to maintain its constitutional, judicious and effective use of power, without which no institution, large or small, can function properly. Since power will often favour some communities or classes at the expense of others, and since democracies — and to some extent all states — ultimately govern with the assent of their citizens, the temptation is always to mask that power in more attractive guises, presenting idealizations or 'necessary fictions' that governments not resting on naked coercion have long employed.

Is that a conspiracy theory? To most middle-of-the-road readers, their favourite newspaper's articles will seem appropriate and sensible, reaffirming that America is indeed the world's much-needed policeman.

Yet these same Americans, among the most generous and hospitable of people, would be bewildered to find their government detested abroad — for its increasing violation of US and international law, for supporting repressive governments in the Middle East and Latin America, for imposing coercive economic policies, and for the many coups and invasions that have removed 'undemocratic' governments. The one essential and beneficent nation, the

defender of democratic freedoms, is widely seen as the greatest threat to world peace.

Foreigners blame Washington, of course, realizing that citizens' views are not properly represented by their governments, and that citizens are anyway fed a pleasing image of themselves through a media controlled by a few large and self-serving corporations: in films, TV and newspapers. Most Americans take their news from the TV, and even quality newspapers provide very little in-depth reporting. Foreign news coverage is partisan, generally no more than Reuters' feeds with slant added to make it more palatable to the target audience. Newspapers cultivate links with government and the CIA. Journalists who stray off message are marginalized or fired. The alternative media, whose articles are often more detailed and better-researched, is bad-mouthed and dismissed as 'fake news'. When honest, intelligent and responsible Americans can have so partisan an outlook, what hope is there for the inbred world of poetry where careers, movements and livelihoods can rest on little more than unsupported opinion?

Downgrading of Literary Criticism

Companies do not waste time honing their mission statement but proactively adapt to changing circumstances and needs. The more successful are 'outside-in', i.e. they continually learn what their customers want by market research, innovation and testing. All company managements, of whatever stripe, are judged on results,

moreover: share price, profitability, productivity, product quality, and market share.

Modern poetry is concerned with few of those things, but, in contrast, often seems to glory in its unpopularity, seeing it as proof of intellectual superiority. Whatever its limitations, literary criticism did attempt some quality controls, setting standards, discovering what worked and what didn't, and why. Radically new work was not rejected out of hand, but compared with the traditional, and some balance sheet drawn up of gains and losses, without which all enterprises founder.

But critical theory has replaced literary criticism in many universities, and often seems closer to politics than sound business practice, i.e. resorts to oversimplification of issues and voter (tenure and publishing) bribery. What literary criticism does survive tends to be narrow and specialized, aimed at fellow academics rather than the general reader. That old ideal of universities, the cultivated, rounded and wisely educated man, has disappeared. Even back in 1999, only 9% of students taking the PSAT (Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test) indicated an interest in the humanities, and English teachers now seem to have lost faith in both their abilities and their subject matter. Indeed the more interesting books and Internet articles already seem dated.

Perhaps that was only to be expected, given the poetry world's attack on the old standards. The articles — well-

chosen, intriguing, often illuminating — that round off Paul Hoover's Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology focus on the need to experiment, to perform and dissolve conceptual boundaries, but say nothing on the poet's larger responsibilities: to bear witness, engender emotion and insight, entertain and make some sense of the world.

Standard of Poetry Today

Back in 1994, the above-mentioned and well-put-together Norton Anthology contained a small sprinkling of successful poems. My count was 20 odd in the 477 poems or selections printed. Not too good for 50 years of American writing, one might think, but most do not amount to what is needed by poetry of any stripe. American work should employ American idioms, and it's sensible (though possibly limiting) to employ everyday speech for contemporary themes. But surely not the:

Pedestrian (e.g. David Antin's a private occasion in a public place)

I consider myself a poet but im not reading poetry as you see

I bring no books with me though ive written books I

Endless shopping list (e.g. Anne Waldman's Makeup on Empty Space)

I am putting makeup on empty space
all patinas convening on empty space

rouge blushing on empty space

Coy (e.g. Bernadette Mayer's Sonnet 15)

A thousand apples you might put in your theories
But you are gone from benefit to my love

Pretentious (e.g. Kenneth Koch's Alive for an Instant)

have a bird in my head and a pig in my stomach
And a flower in my genitals and a tiger in my genitals

Perverse (e.g. Clayton Eshleton's Notes on a Visit to Le Tuc
d'Audoubert)

bundled by Tuc's tight jagged
corridors, flocks of white

Or the breathless 'this is a poet talking to you' tone (e.g.
Robert Duncan's Poetry, A Natural Thing).

The poem
feeds upon thought, feeling, impulse,
to breed itself,
a spiritual urgency at the dark ladders leaping.

Only Allen Ginsberg, Bruce Andrews, Susan Howe, Amiri
Baraka and Bob Perelman seem to have any larger, political
awareness. Postmodernism dislikes 'grand narratives' but

few of the poems even concern themselves with the issues of the workaday world, or indeed offer anything that could conceivably interest the general reader — assertive, refreshingly different, coterie-centered, obsessed with the process of writing, intriguing in small doses: that's about as generous as one can truthfully be.

However modest may be that achievement, the later work collected in the 2006 Oxford Book of American Poetry is even more negligible. Nor does a survey of the small press output prove any less depressing. Most offerings are not poetry by any usual meaning of the word, and fewer still are wholly successful, even within their own limits. William Logan is surely correct: current American poetry is in a bad way.

Even poets on the public circuit seem embarrassed by questions like: 'what does poetry do?' 'Its gatekeepers believe poetry matters because it's poetry, not because of what it says.' Certainly the aims of poetry are discussed, endlessly in literary circles — the excellent *The Great American Poetry Show* had listed 4774 articles and essays by March 2016. — but their tone overall is more defensive than celebratory, quoting authorities rather than striking out for higher ground.

State-Supported Poetry

Serious poetry has become almost exclusively university-based. It is tertiary education and associated MFA teaching courses that give contemporary poets their salaries, status and publishing opportunities. But if academia has become

practically their sole refuge, that refuge is also under threat. Political correctness, budget cuts, perpetual assessment by students ill-placed to judge, disappearing tenure, and uncertainty over the bases of literature itself have created an academic rat race where it is the astute political operator that best survives. Work must conform to academic standards, support the narrow tenets of Modernism, and not seriously question establishment views.

Tenure in the humanities is hard to gain, and increasingly easy to lose. Outside tenure there is only part-time and ill-paid teaching. Beyond academia itself there is practically nothing: academics are not trained in journalism, and the balanced and well-researched article is not what popular outlets want. Alternative media are expanding, of course, but still struggle to pay their authors a living wage.

Public appointments expect public views, as Amiri Baraka found. In 2002, a year after 9/11, the black American poet and activist read a long poem criticizing America and including questions about the Israeli intelligence warning of an impending attack on the twin towers. It was in his usual no-holds-barred, in-your-face style, and the poet was writing from an establishment position as the poet laureate of New Jersey. The response was loud and predictable. The Jewish community accused him of anti-Semitism, and demanded his resignation. The mainstream press demonised him as anti-American. The literary world distanced itself from his views, but pleaded for artistic freedom.

No one pointed to the obvious, that firstly the poem was crude pamphleteering and, secondly, there was nonetheless a pressing need for a sustained, detailed and transparent investigation into the 9/11 tragedy, as there still is. The media shot the messenger, or tried to, as the unrepentant Marxist wouldn't lie down. Baraka did not resign, and the Governor was obliged to discontinue the position.

A literary world so dependent on the public purse will encourage a poetry that knows its place, i.e. be adventurous in arcane and theoretical matters, but not seriously threaten the mainstream narratives that govern American life.

Extinction of Traditional Poetry

Critical theory was first helpful but then became more hostile to traditional poetry, eventually killing off its host.

American poetry in the early years of the twentieth century was popular and profitable, having, its supporters declared, the ability to 'beget spiritual sensibility, to build character, and to refine one's sense of beauty, truth, or morality.

Modernists were following other concerns, however, and their 'unpoetic' productions did not much feature in mass-circulation magazines or later radio shows. High Modernism and the New Criticism eventually triumphed, after a long battle through the universities, becoming the reigning orthodoxy in the 1940-50 period, when poets who had written excellent but alas popular poetry — Kipling,

Masefield, de la Mare — were 'reassessed' and marked down. Improved university courses passed them by, and their rehabilitation continues to depend on approved Modernist elements being identified among their other features.

The fight was bitter, and hostility naturally continued long after victory, against all forms of tradition, and society in general, however unreasonable. Inevitably, with triumph of the Modernist paradigm, came unswerving belief in the innate correctness of its views, and these beliefs are held just as firmly as those of the American Academy of Arts and Letters that for thirty years stood opposed to the 'the lawlessness of the literary Bolsheviki [that] has invaded every form of composition.' Modernism today may be no more aware of increasing dissatisfaction with its narrow views than had been the earlier Academy that 'irony and pastiche and parody and a conscious fever of innovation-through-rupture would overcome notions of nobility, spirituality, continuity, harmony, uncomplicated patriotism, romanticized classicism.

Suggestions

What alternatives exist for contemporary poetry? Only, it seems to me, by rethinking the history of Modernism, and perhaps reshaping English Literature courses to:

1. Rework what Modernism has made available to poetry — all the ground, not merely the latest fad.

2. Foster a genuine love of literature, sufficient to carry graduates over a lifetime of deepening and delighted reading.
3. Treat critical theory in its broader framework of aesthetics and related philosophic issues.
4. Insist students have a proper grounding in cultural history, not only western but worldwide. Literature cannot be understood in isolation.
5. Teach writing skills that allow complex and contentious material to be addressed in the manner of educated beings: with sensitivity, intelligence and some sense of proportion and good humour.
6. Appreciate that literature is both inspiration and craft. Poetry in particular will not recover its popularity until it writes movingly on things that matter to everyday people.

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The page is extracted from Chapter 24 of my *Literary Theory* (considerably shortened and shorn of its 158 references) — to which readers are referred for a more detailed treatment. The rather miscellaneous references not included in that chapter are:

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Truth in Poetry

Introduction: Overview of Argument

Does poetry tell the truth, and what sort of truth could that be? Sceptics have long spoken of 'poetic license', and matters are even more contested today. The most prominent school of literary criticism, still called *The New Criticism*, viewed truth as irrelevant. Poetry was fiction, and at best could only give the emotional equivalent of facts. Poems were complex, moreover, and many operated by deploying meanings at different levels. Behind lines and phrases lurked many ambiguities and paradoxes, which held the poem together in creative tensions. *The New Criticism* looked for three characteristics. First was self-sufficiency: the poem should be independent of biography, historical content or effect on the reader, which were called the intentional, historical and affective fallacies. Second was unity: the poem should be a coherent whole: a very traditional view. Third was complexity: which was sometimes held to be the central element of poetry. {1}

Other schools disagreed. The Marxist critics felt that literary criticism ought to be a history of man's ideas and imaginings in the (economic) setting which shaped them. {2} The Christian apologists felt that the arts had a civilizing mission, and deprecated the subversive attitudes of many Modernist writers. {3} And the historicists sought a continuity between western industrial societies and the medieval past. {4}

By contrast, contemporary poetry seems to have given up on truth altogether. Post-modernists come in many embodiments, but share a preoccupation with language. Reality is not mediated by what we read or write, but is entirely constituted *by* those actions. We don't therefore look *at* the world through a poem, and ask how whether the representation is true or adequate or appropriate, but focus on the devices and strategies within the text itself. Postmodernist poetry discounts *The New Criticism's* stress on unity, moreover, and urges us to accept a looser view of art, one that accords more with everyday realities and shows how language suppresses alternative views, particularly those of the socially or politically disadvantaged. Postmodernist poems have moved on from their Modernist forebears. They are wholly immersed in language, and make no reference to a world beyond. What does concern them is estrangement, or the defamiliarisation of the everyday, the arbitrary choice of words, teased out by deconstructive techniques, the absence of a final interpretation, i.e. avoidance of closure and artistic autonomy, the repressions implicit in language, whether sexist, social or political, and a wide subject matter, beyond the ennobling virtues championed by humanism. {5}

So why the interest in poetic truth? Why investigate something that poetry has long renounced? In this long article, I shall try to show that:

1. Whatever problems language suffers from, the problems

are just as acute in other areas of life — in philosophy, mathematics and science — where they are accepted and worked with.

2. Poetry's current shadow-boxing with language is therefore misplaced, and rather than create conundrums in Postmodernist poems, poetry would do better to make the intellectual journey in other disciplines. Poetry is not equipped for such enterprises, and should return to its more traditional role, responding to the world as it is broadly seen and understood.

3. Truth may not be embodied in logic and abstractions, but in the ways communities operate and live together in common understandings. If that is the case, poetry will not recapture a wider public until it embodies more of those common understandings.

Readers wanting a more detailed and referenced account may wish to consult chapters in Ocaso Press's free Literary Theory, from which most of this page is quarried.

Truth in Philosophy and its Difficulties

What do we mean by calling something true? Most obviously we mean according with or corresponding to 'the facts', but this correspondence theory of truth has few followers among philosophers because of a naive acceptance of 'the facts.' Even at its basic level, things in the world are not directly given to us: we make interpretations and intelligent integrations of our sensory experience, as Kant claimed and

extensive studies of the physiology of perception show all too plainly. {6} Scientists make observations in ways guided by contemporary practice and the nature of the task in hand.

What does this mean? That truth and meaning are mere words, brief stopping places on an endless web of references? No. If we want a truth and meaning underwritten entirely by logic — completely, each step of the way, with no possible exceptions — then that goal has not been reached. The match is close enough to refute the extravagant claims of Postmodernism, but not complete.

But perhaps the enterprise was always over-ambitious. After all, Russell and Whitehead's {7} monumental attempt to base mathematics on logic also failed, and even mathematics can have gaps in its own procedures, as Gödel {8} indicated.

Coherence

So what other approaches are there? Two: the theory of coherence and that of pragmatism. The first calls something true when it fits neatly into a well-integrated body of beliefs. The second is judged by its results, the practical 'cash value' of its contribution. Theories of coherence were embraced by very different philosophies, and pragmatism is currently enjoying a modest revival in the States.

Stated more formally, {10} the coherence theory holds that

truth consists in a relation of coherence between beliefs or propositions in a set, such that a belief is false when it fails to fit with other mutually coherent members of a set.

Though this concept of truth may seem more applicable to aesthetics or sociology, even a scientific theory is commonly preferred on the grounds of simplicity, experimental accessibility, utility, theoretical elegance and strength, fertility and association with models rendering such processes intelligible. {11}

But if the set of beliefs needs to be as comprehensive as possible, what is to stop us inflating the system with beliefs whose only merit is that they fit the system, to make a larger but still consistent fairy-tale? Appeal to the outside world — that these new beliefs are indeed 'facts' — is invalid, as our measure of truth is coherence within the set of beliefs, not correspondence with matters outside. {12}

Given that there will be more than one way of choosing a set of beliefs from the available data, and no external criteria help us decide, Rescher {13} suggested using plausibility filters. We select those beliefs that seem in themselves most plausible, reducing the short-list by further selection if necessary. But how is this plausibility to be decided? If beliefs resembles Euclid's geometry, we might indeed accept some of them — that parallel lines never meet, for example — by an appeal to sturdy common sense, but most beliefs are not of this nature, and even Euclidean geometry has its limits. How can we be sure — a further problem — that our set of beliefs is the most comprehensive possible if new

investigations may yet turn up data that is better incorporated in another set of beliefs?

Idealists like Bradley {14} argued that reality was a unified and coherent whole, which he called the Absolute. Parts of the whole could only be partly true, and even those parts were doubtfully true given the uncertain nature of our sense perceptions. Better base truth in our rational faculties, he thought, and look for consistency and interdependence in what our thoughts tell us. But again there are difficulties. How much interdependence? If everything in a set of beliefs is entirely interdependent, then each one belief is entailed by each other belief, which leads to absurdities. If the interdependence is loosened, then the requirements for inclusion become less clear.{15}

Some Logical Positivists tried to get the best of both worlds. Incorrigible reports on experience, which they called protocol sentences, were based on correspondence of knowledge and reality, but the assemblage of protocol sentences as a whole depended on their consistency and interdependence, i.e. on coherence theory. But even this happy compromise was dashed by Neurath who pointed out that protocol sentences were not then the product of unbiased observation as required, but of investigations controlled by the need for coherence in the set of protocol sentences. What controls what? We are like sailors, he said, who must completely rebuild their boat on the open sea. {16}

Pragmatism

What then of the third theory of truth: pragmatism? In its crudest form, that something is true simply because it yields good works or congenial beliefs, the theory has few adherents. But its proponents — Pierce, James, Dewey and latterly Quine — put matters more subtly. Reality, said C.S. Pierce, constrains us to the truth: we find by enquiry and experiment what the world is really like. Truth is the consensus of beliefs surviving that investigation, a view that includes some correspondence theory and foreshadows Quine's web of beliefs. William James was not so committed a realist, and saw truth as sometimes manufactured by the verification process itself, a view that links him to relativists like Feyerband. John Dewey stressed the context of application, that we need to judge ideas by how they work in specific practices. But that makes truth into a property acquired in the individual circumstances of verification, perhaps even individual-dependent, which has obvious drawbacks. {17}

But 'The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it', wrote James.{18} 'Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process, the process namely of its verifying itself, its verification... Any idea that helps us to deal, whether practically or intellectually, with reality, that doesn't entangle our progress in frustrations, that fits, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree

sufficiently to meet the requirement. The true, to put it briefly, is only the expedient in our way of thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in our way of behaving.' Expedient in almost any fashion, and expedient in the long run and on the whole, of course. But what of inexpedient truths, don't they exist? And what of truths as yet unverified, but nonetheless truths for all that? Truth as something active, that helps us deal with life, is an important consideration, but pragmatism ultimately affords no more complete a theory of truth than those of correspondence or coherence.

Truth in Mathematics

Though mathematics might seem the clearest and most certain kind of knowledge we possess, there are problems just as serious as those in any other branch of philosophy. What is the nature of mathematics? In what sense do its propositions have meaning? {19}

Foundations

Plato believed in Forms or Ideas that were eternal, capable of precise definition and independent of perception. Among such entities he included numbers and the objects of geometry — lines, points, circles — which were therefore apprehended not with the senses but with reason. 'Mathematics' — the objects mathematics deals with — were specific instances of ideal Forms. Since the true propositions of mathematics were true of the unchangeable relations between unchangeable objects, they were

inevitably true, which means that mathematics discovers pre-existing truths 'out there' rather than creates something from our mental predispositions. And as for the objects perceived by our senses, one apple, two pears, etc. they are only poor and evanescent copies of the Forms one, two, etc., and something the philosopher need not overmuch concern himself with. Mathematics dealt with truth and ultimate reality. {20}

Aristotle disagreed. Forms were not entities remote from appearance but something which entered into objects of the world. That we can abstract oneness or circularity does not mean that these abstractions represent something remote and eternal. Mathematics was simply reasoning about idealizations. Aristotle looked closely at the structure of mathematics, distinguishing logic, principles used to demonstrate theorems, definitions (which do not suppose the defined actually exist), and hypotheses (which do suppose they actually exist). He also reflected on infinity, perceiving the difference between a potential infinity (e.g. adding one to a number ad infinitum) and a complete infinity (e.g. number of points into which a line is divisible). {20}

Leibniz brought together logic and mathematics. But whereas Aristotle used propositions of the subject-predicate form, Leibniz argued that the subject 'contains' the predicate: a view that brought in infinity and God. Mathematical propositions are not true because they deal in eternal or idealized entities, but because their denial is

logically impossible. They are true not only of this world, or the world of eternal Forms, but of all possible worlds. Unlike Plato, for whom constructions were adventitious aids, Leibniz saw the importance of notation, a symbolism of calculation, and so began what became very important in the twentieth century: a method of forming and arranging characters and signs to represent the relationships between mathematical thoughts. {20}

Mathematical entities for Kant were a-priori synthetic propositions, which of course provide the necessary conditions for objective experience. Time and space were matrices, the containers holding the changing material of perception. Mathematics was the description of space and time. If restricted to thought, mathematical concepts required only self-consistency, but the construction of such concepts involves space having a certain structure, which in Kant's day was described by Euclidean geometry. As for applied mathematics — the distinction between the abstract 'two' and 'two pears' — this is construction plus empirical matter. {20}

Principia Mathematica

Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and their followers developed Leibniz's idea that mathematics was something logically undeniable. Frege used general laws of logic plus definitions, formulating a symbolic notation for the reasoning required. Inevitably,

through the long chains of reasoning, these symbols became less intuitively obvious, the transition being mediated by definitions. What were these definitions? Russell saw them as notational conveniences, mere steps in the argument. Frege saw them as implying something worthy of careful thought, often presenting key mathematical concepts from new angles. If in Russell's case the definitions had no objective existence, in Frege's case the matter was not so clear: the definitions were logical objects which claim an existence equal to other mathematical entities. Nonetheless, Russell carried on, resolving and side-stepping many logical paradoxes, to create with Whitehead the monumental system of description and notation of the *Principia Mathematica* (1910-13). {21}

Many were impressed but not won over. If natural numbers were defined through classes — one of the system's more notable achievements — weren't these classes in turn defined through similarities, which left open how the similarities were themselves defined if the argument was not to be merely circular? The logical concept of number had also to be defined through the non-logical hypothesis of infinity, every natural number n requiring a unique successor $n+1$. And since such a requirement hardly applies to the real world, the concept of natural numbers differs in its two incarnations, in pure and applied mathematics. Does this matter? Yes indeed, as number is not continuous in atomic processes, a fact acknowledged in the term quantum mechanics. Worse still, the *Principia* incorporated almost all

of Cantor's transfinite mathematics, which gave rise to contradictions when matching class and subclass, difficulties that undermined the completeness with which numbers may be defined. {22}

Logic in geometry may be developed in two ways. The first is to use one-to-one correspondences. Geometric entities — lines, points, circle, etc. — are matched with numbers or sets of numbers, and geometric relationships are matched with relationships between numbers. The second is to avoid numbers altogether and define geometric entities partially but directly by their relationships to other geometric entities. Such definitions are logically disconnected from perceptual statements, so that the dichotomy between pure and applied mathematics continues, somewhat paralleling Plato's distinction between pure Forms and their earthly copies. Alternative self-consistent geometries can be developed, therefore, and one cannot say beforehand whether actuality (say the wider spaces of the cosmos) is or is not Euclidean. Moreover, the shortcomings of the logistic procedures remain, in geometry and in number theory. {23}

Even Russell saw the difficulty with set theory. We can distinguish sets that belong to themselves from sets that do not. But what happens when we consider the set of all sets that do not belong to themselves? Mathematics had been shaken to its core in the nineteenth century by the realization that the infallible mathematical intuition that underlay geometry was not infallible at all. There were

space-filling curves. There were continuous curves that could be nowhere differentiated. There were geometries other than Euclid's that gave perfectly intelligible results. Now there was the logical paradox of a set both belonging and not belonging to itself. Ad-hoc solutions could be found, but something more substantial was wanted. David Hilbert (1862-1943) and his school tried to reach the same ends as Russell, but abandoned some of the larger claims of mathematics. Mathematics was simply the manipulation of symbols according to specified rules. The focus of interest was the entities themselves and the rules governing their manipulation, not the references they might or might not have to logic or to the physical world.

In fact Hilbert was not giving up Cantor's world of transfinite mathematics, but accommodating it to a mathematics concerned with concrete objects. Just as Kant had employed reason to categories beyond sense perceptions — moral freedoms and religious faith — so Hilbert applied the real notions of finite mathematics to the ideal notions of transfinite mathematics.

Gödel

And the programme fared very well at first. It employed finite methods — i.e. concepts that could be insubstantiated in perception, statements in which the statements are correctly applied, and inferences from these statements to other statements. Most clearly this was seen in classical

arithmetic. Transfinite mathematics, which is used in projective geometry and algebra, for example, gives rise to contradictions, which makes it all the more important to see arithmetic as fundamental. Volume I of Hilbert and Bernays's classic work had been published, and II was being prepared when, in 1931, Gödel's second incompleteness theorem brought the programme to an end. Gödel showed, fairly simply and quite conclusively, that such formalisms could not formalize arithmetic completely.

Morris Kline {24} remarked that relativity reminds us that nature presents herself as an organic whole, with space, matter and time commingled. Humans have in the past analysed nature, selected certain properties as the most important, forgotten that they were abstracted aspects of a whole, and regarded them thereafter as distinct entities. They were then surprised to find that they must reunite these supposed separate concepts to obtain a consistent, satisfactory synthesis of knowledge. Almost from the beginning, men have carried out algebraic reasoning independent of sense experience. Who can visualize a non-Euclidean world of four or more dimensions? Or the Schrödinger wave equations, or antimatter? Or electromagnetic radiation that moves without a supporting ether? Modern science has dispelled angels and mysticism, but it has also removed intuitive and physical content that appeals to experience. 'We have seen the truth,' said G.K. Chesterton, 'and it makes no sense.' Nonetheless, mathematics remains useful, indeed vital, and no one

despairs because its conceptions do not entirely square with the world.

Most mathematicians do not fish these difficult waters. The theoretical basis of mathematics is one aspect of the subject, but not the most interesting, nor the most important. Like their scientist colleagues, they assert simply that their discipline 'works'. They accept that mathematics cannot entirely know or describe itself, that it may not be a seamless activity, and that contradictions may arise from unexpected quarters. {25} Mathematics is an intellectual adventure, and it would be disappointing if its insights could be explained away in concepts or procedures we could fully circumscribe.

What is the relevance to poetry? Only that both mathematics and poetry seem partly creations and partly discoveries of something fundamental about ourselves and the world around. Elegance, fertility and depth are important qualities in both disciplines, and behind them both lurks incompleteness and unfathomable strangeness.

Truth in Science

To the ancients, scientia meant knowledge and experience: wisdom, in short. But science today implies something else: knowledge collected by following certain rules, and presented in a certain way. Scientists are realists: they believe in the existence of an external reality which philosophers have never been able to prove. The point is worth stressing. Science attempts to make a sharp

distinction between the world out there, which is real and independent of us, and the individual's thoughts and feelings, which are internal and inconstant and to be explained eventually in terms of outside realities. {26}

Must science rest on strong logical foundations? Probably not. Much in quantum theory is contra-intuitive. {27} Randomness enters into relatively simple systems. {28} We deduce consequences from theories so as to check them. And we induce theories from observations, which Aristotle called generalizing. Scientific laws are often best expressed in mathematical form — giving them precise formulation and prediction — but mathematics does not rest on logic: the attempts last century by Russell and Whitehead ended in paradoxes, and the formalist approach of Hilbert was overthrown by Gödel's incompleteness theorem.

The Problem of Induction

Many problems were noted long ago. How much evidence needs to be assembled before a generalization becomes overwhelmingly certain? It is never certain. David Hume (1711-76) pointed out that no scientific law is ever conclusively verified. That the sun has risen every morning so far will not logically entail the sun rising in future. Effect is simply what follows cause: laws of function are only habit. {29}

There are further difficulties with induction. Scientists make

a large number of observations from which to generalize. But these observations are made with a purpose, not randomly: they are selected according to the theory to be tested, or what the discipline prescribes as relevant. Then the eye (or any other organ) does not record like a camera, but interprets according to experience and expectation. Theory is to some extent threaded into observation. Finally, there is the reporting of observations, which must be assembled and regimented in accordance with the theory being advanced or refuted.

Does this worry scientists? Not at all. Whatever the philosophic difficulties, science works, and its successes are augmented every day. Besides, the problem can be circumvented by employing statistical relevance. We assemble the factors that might be relevant and see how probability changes as a result. For example: if the probability of Event E given Cause C is changed by Factor A, then A is relevant — matters which can be set out in probability theory. {30}

Karl Popper: The Falsifiability Thesis

But if induction is the weak link in science, why not remove it altogether? Science, claimed Karl Popper (1902-94), proceeds by guesses that are continually tested, i.e. by conjectures and refutations. {31} That is the real essence of science, not that its conclusions may be verified, but that they can be refuted. Metaphysics, art and psychoanalysis

cannot be so falsified, and they are therefore not science.

{32}

Are scientists objective, carefully considering theories on the basis of evidence, and that alone? Only to some extent.

Scientists are human, and their work is fuelled by their interests, career needs and animosities like everyone else's.

{33} But independence is claimed for the end product. The

scientific paper may not represent the twists and turns of thought and experiment, but aren't the final results

objectively presented, earlier workers acknowledged, and arguments for acceptance soberly marshalled? Not really.

Papers do not let the facts speak for themselves. The

evidence is persuasively presented: there is a rhetoric of

science. {34} Papers are refereed, and maverick views

excluded. Vetting by peer-groups discounts or expunges

work that starts from different assumptions or comes to

fundamentally unsettling conclusions.

Kuhn's View: The Scientific Paradigm

Science, postulated Thomas Kuhn, employed conceptual frameworks, ways of looking at the world that excluded rival

conceptions. These paradigms, as he called them, were

traditions of thinking and acting in a certain field. They

represented the totality of background information, of laws

and theories which are taught to aspiring scientist as true,

and which in turn the scientist has to accept if he is to be

accepted into the scientific community. Scientific enterprise

is conservative. The paradigm legislates. What lies outside its traditions is non-science. And for long periods science proceeds quietly and cumulatively, extending and perfecting the traditions. Anomalies, even quite large anomalies, are accepted for the sake of overall coherence. But when the anomalies become too large, and (crucially) make better sense in a new paradigm, there occurs a scientific revolution. The old laws, the terminology and the evidence all suddenly shift to accommodate the new paradigm. {35}

Imre Lakatos

The second challenge to Popper came from Imre Lakatos, who grouped theories into 'research programmes' and made these the deciding mechanism. Each such programme possessed a hard core of sacrosanct information established over a long period of trial and error. Round the core was a protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses and observations that were being constantly tested and modified. Programmes guided scientists in their choice of problems to pursue, and were attractive ('progressive', Lakatos called them) to the extent that they accumulated empirical support and made novel predictions. Above all, programmes protected scientists from inconvenient facts and confusing observations — necessarily, or many eventually successful theories would have been strangled at birth.

Though the auxiliary belt served to protect the research programme core, and was constantly being modified, these

modifications could not be made ad hoc, devised simply to get round a particular problem. They had to be falsifiable: Lakatos agreed with Popper that sociology and psychoanalysis were unscientific on this basis. But how is the progressive research programme to be distinguished from the degenerating one, except by hindsight? Kuhn accepted a leap of faith, an intuitive feel for where the future lay, but Lakatos did not. {36}

Paul Feyerabend

Paul Feyerabend initially {37} won a considerable reputation as an historian of science prepared to get down to precise scientific detail. He was a realist in the Popper sense, and argued that science progressed through proliferating theories, rather than coalescing into a prevailing Kuhnian paradigm. Subsequently, to the horror of colleagues and friends, he took a sociological and anarchistic line, arguing that true science was being stifled by the scientific establishment, an institution as self-serving and undemocratic as the medieval Church. {38}

Implications

Kuhn's views, and more particularly Feyerabend's, were seized upon as evidence that the scientific world-view was simply one paradigm amongst many. Despite its prestige and practical triumphs, science was as much a myth as art or literature or psychoanalysis. Kuhn hotly denied this, and

backtracked very much from his earlier position. Both he and Popper were dismayed to see their views hijacked by the relativists, as support for the view that each person makes his own reality or concept of truth. {39} Relativism is disliked by philosophers, and the refutation is straightforward. If something is true only within a confined system — one world-view, one person's consciousness — how are we to know whether this has any currency in time or space? Even to record our observations needs a language, and languages cannot be wholly private. {40}

Those who attack science for its remote and reductive nature, its cold-blooded efficiency and elitist decision-making should not forget how well science actually works. Scientific observations may be theory-laden, but those theories are tested in a communality of practice. If once depicted as mechanical and predetermined, science appears less so now that quantum and chaotic processes have been more widely recognized. Science does bring great operational efficiency, and its findings cannot be called myths in the sense understood in anthropology or literary criticism. Science attempts not only to understand nature, but to control nature, and there is hardly an aspect of life today that could be conducted without its help. In short, science does seem essentially different from the arts, and its successes would be miraculous if there was not some correspondence between its theories and 'reality', whatever that 'reality' may be.

The New Science

Paradoxically, now that literary criticism is adopting many of the previous methods and outlooks of science, science itself is moving on. The newer sciences recognize the role of scientists in their experiments, the pervasiveness of chaotic systems, and the complex nature of brain functioning. Science is an abstraction, and for all its astonishing success, can only make models that leave out much that is important to human beings.

Dilemmas

But even in the hard sciences, the methodology has its problems. What exactly are electrons? They behave both as particles and a wave action. Perplexingly, they disappear when they meet their opposite number, the positron. Worse still, they obey statistical laws, the Schrödinger wave equations only indicating the percentage likelihood of an electron being in a certain position with a certain speed. Of course we can rationalize the situation, say that an electron is like nothing else but an electron, and that the very act of observing upsets its speed and position. But that is not the orthodox view, or very comforting. The electron is a lepton, one of the fundamental building blocks of matter, and if these blocks do not have solid objective existence, what does? {41} The building blocks seem inter-linked in a way they should not be, moreover, seeming to communicate instantaneously — faster than the speed of light, which the General Theory of Relativity declares impossible. {42}

And matters at the other end of the scale, in astrophysics, are equally baffling. The universe may have originated out of nothing, a false vacuum collapse, which co-created other universes that will always remain outside our detection. And the fabric of the universe may be constituted by superstrings, loops of incredibly small size. Originally these superstrings had 26 dimensions, but 6 have compacted to invisibility and 16 have internal dimensions to account for fundamental forces. {43} Is this credible? The theory is contested, and may indeed turn out to be pure mathematics — which is shaky in places, not only in superstrings, but generally. {44}

But if the world is stranger than we can conceive it, it is no longer in areas we cannot enter anyway, the very small or the very large. Science has traditionally dealt with reversible, linear situations: small causes that have small effects, and are totally predictable. But most of the world is not that way at all. The cup slips from our grasp at breakfast, we have a row with our partner for spoiling the new carpet, go late to the office in a foul temper, fall out with the boss, are fired, lose the home and partner and indeed everything from the most insignificant incident. And that is by no means an exceptional, one-off situation. Non-linear situations are common enough in scientific investigations but were blithely ignored. Scientists only reported the experiments that worked, that provided the simple relationships they were looking for. {45}

Complex Systems

A new science accepts this web-like view of the world. Called by a variety of names — study of dissipative structures, complex systems, life systems {46} — it has grown from the unexpected fusion of two very different fields. One is computer simulation of complex systems that hover on the border between chaos and regularity. The other is the behaviour of living organisms.

Complex systems are now an immense field of study, difficult to summarize briefly, but their essential feature is non-linearity. The future behaviour of the system depends on its prior behaviour and through feed-backs has an inbuilt element of randomness. Such behaviour is seen in very simple systems (e.g. one represented by $X' = kx(1 - x)$ where x is the value initially, and X the value at a later time) but real-life examples are usually much more complicated, often resulting from the interaction of several such systems. The system will exhibit areas of simple behaviour: movement towards a single point, or oscillation between two or more points, but there will also be areas of chaotic behaviour where the smallest change in prior conditions causes wild fluctuations later on. But even more characteristic of these systems are strange attractors. The system revolves round certain points, continually tracing trajectories that are very similar but never exactly identical. {47}

Life Systems

What has this to do with life? Certain chemical reactions behave in a similar way, and their behaviour mimics those of living systems, even though the reactions involve non-organic compounds that would individually behave quite straightforwardly. Given feedback mechanisms — and many chemical reactions are reversible — there arise areas or islands of order on the very edge of chaos. Most importantly, the systems organize themselves, automatically, out of the web of interacting reactions. They have emergent properties where behaviour is different and not to be predicted from the behaviour at a lower level.

Living creatures may owe their structures to such self-organization of their constituent chemicals: in the metabolism of cells, brain functioning, even the way the DNA code is interpreted to produce the right sequence of cells in the growing animal. On a broader field, that of ecosystems and natural selection, it may be that species themselves represent strange attractors, with parallel evolution in the likes of whales and marsupial wolves. {48} Indeed the theory of networks can be very generally extended. Life, according to the Santiago school of Maturana and Varela, {49} is characterized by two features: cognition and the ability to reproduce. Cognition means making distinctions and is shown by all forms of life, even the lowliest. But only man, and possibly the higher primates to some extent, know that they know, i.e. have self-awareness

and an inner world. Self awareness is closely tied to language, which is not a mental representation or a transfer of information, but a coordination of behaviour. Language is a communication about communication, by which we bring forth a world, weaving the linguistic network in which we live.

At a stroke, a good deal of philosophy's aims are thrown away. Mental states embody certain sensations. Cognitive experience involves resonance — technically phase-locking — between specific cell assemblies in the brain: e.g. those dealing with perception, emotion, memory, bodily movement, and also involves the whole body's nervous systems. Attempts to define, or even to illuminate, such concepts as consciousness, being, truth and ethical value are no more than knottings in the web of understanding. Words lead back to physiology and bodily functioning, not to any abstract notions based on irrefutable logic. {50}

Metaphor Theory

That is the view of metaphor theory, which suggests conventional views of science, philosophy, society and even abstract disciplines like mathematics have a basis in innate human dispositions. If we cannot find an objective meaning for something as homely as money except as something reflecting and facilitating transactions in human societies, when those societies themselves evade full capture by rational processes, the reason may lie in outmoded concepts

of certainty. The world is inherently ambiguous, and what seems but plain facts to one generation may be arrant nonsense to the next. Always there is a need for evidence, and close argumentation, but nothing in the humanities or sciences is ever permanently settled, any more than widely differing political views can be finally reconciled, or a definitive account be written of some period in history. We select and abstract the evidence in ways that seems important. We assemble that material in the patterns and pictures we are comfortable with. We find comfortable largely what our backgrounds, experience and personalities dictate. Those individual aspects must conform in many ways to the societies in which we live, and those societies in their turn are influenced by us. In such complex and interlocking situations, all that we can make of viewpoints are partial and transitory models that correspond to innate bodily processes — models are what metaphor theory calls schemas.

Metaphor commonly means saying one thing while intending another, making implicit comparisons between things linked by a common feature. Scientists, logicians and lawyers prefer to stress the literal meaning of words, regarding metaphor as picturesque ornament. But there is the obvious fact that language is built of dead metaphors. Metaphors are therefore active in understanding. We use metaphors to group areas of experience (life is a journey), to orientate ourselves (my consciousness was raised), to convey expression through the senses (his eyes were glued to the

screen), to describe learning (it had a germ of truth in it), etc. Even ideas are commonly pictured as objects (the idea had been around for a while), as containers (I didn't get anything out of that) or as things to be transferred (he got the idea across). Metaphor is a commonplace in literature, and generally regarded as a rhetorical device, simply a means of persuasion. {51} Metaphor has only a supporting role in meaning, and certainly not seen as something actually constituting meaning. Yet such is the suggestion of Lakoff and Johnson. {52-53}

Metaphors reflect schemas, which are constructions of reality using the assimilation and association of sensorimotor processes to anticipate actions in the world. Schemas are plural, interconnecting in our minds to represent how we perceive, act, react and consider. Far from being mere matters of style, metaphors organize our experience, creating realities that guide our futures and reinforce interpretations. Truth is therefore truth relative to some understanding, and that understanding involves categories that emerge from our interaction with experience. Schemas are neither fixed nor uniform, but cognitive models of bodily activities prior to producing language. The cognitive models proposed by the later work of Lakoff and Johnson are tentative but very varied, the most complex being radial with multiple schema linked to a common centre. Language is characterized by symbolic models (with generative grammar an overlying, subsequent addition) and operates through propositional, image schematic, metaphoric and

metonymic models. Properties are matters of relationships and prototypes. Meaning arises through embodiment in schemas. Schemas can also be regarded as containers-part-whole, link, centre-periphery, source-path-goal, up-down, front-back.

The approach is clearly technical and controversial. It contests the claims of philosophy or mathematics to pre-eminence, and places knowledge in a wider context. Meaning lies in body physiology and social activity as well as cerebral functioning. Our temperaments and experiences colour our thoughts, and the philosopher's search for abstract and indisputable truth is an impossible dream. How human beings act in practice is the crucial test, and in practice humans paraphrase according to context and need. Comprehension can never be complete, and specializations that would base truth on logic, mathematics, invariant relationships in the physical world or in social generalities make that comprehension even less attainable. Indeed the approach is entirely misconceived. Multiplicity is what makes us human, and we live variously in conceptions that arise from the totality of our experiences — physiological and mental, private and social. Science and the arts are slowly, very slowly, converging to give us a fuller and more comprehensive view of the world, and that view is anticipated by schema that draw no sharp line between rationality and irrationality, between thought and emotion, between the world out there and our private universes, between our mental and our bodily activities. Yes, the

distinctions can be made — and indeed have to be made for practical purposes — but the distinctions represent a narrowing of conception and possibility.

That meanings lie in the social purposes of words rather than any fiat of logicians was the view of the later Wittgenstein, a proposal that has wide acceptance. {54-55} If language is not a self-sufficient system of signs without outside reference, nor a set of logical structures, what else could it be? Social expression. Rather than pluck theories from the air, or demand of language an impossibly logical consistency, we should study language as it is actually used. Much that is dear to the philosopher's heart has to be given up — exact definitions of meaning and truth, for example, and large parts of metaphysics altogether. And far from analysing thought and its consequences, philosophy must now merely describe it. But the gain is the roles words are observed 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. To see through the bewitchment of language is the task of philosophy.

Science itself recognizes the shortcomings in the old attitudes. The descriptive sciences never fitted the formula well, and the social sciences failed altogether. Many complex situations defy mathematically modelling, and are best approached through successive approximation or neural nets. Chaos theory destroys determinism in many areas, emphasizing the importance of the contingent and

unforeseen.

Knowledge Systems as Myths

So, to return to poetry, does art give us knowledge of the world? Most would emphatically say yes. Not intellectual knowledge, exactly, not knowledge as a construal of relations between abstract entities representing human experience, but something more authentic, immediate and sensory. Art is surely the great peacemaker, moreover, bridging ideological differences and making real our common humanity. When we remember how bitter and bloodstained have been the wars between religions, each claiming knowledge of unknowables, should we not be wary of the whole process of abstraction from experience, of what really constitutes knowledge? Could we not say that logic and argument were human propensities, something essential to us, but not wholly so transcendent that we must follow them regardless of other perceptions and inclinations? And if we look at what arguments must derive from, intellectual foundations, we find, even in the most abstract of disciplines — mathematics, philosophy, mathematics, science — eventually only lacunae, paradoxes, matters resolved in working agreements between practitioners? In short, rather than dress up knowledge in high-minded principle and rarefied abstraction, should we not look closely at how the communities creating knowledge do in fact go about their business? Possibly knowledge is not ultimately decided on argument and abstraction, but on the varied operation of

many human needs and desires.

Knowledge therefore involves myths, in the best sense of that word, thought Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) {56} and Susanne Langer (1895-1985) {57}. 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.

But most importantly, religion, science and art give meaning to life. They are the emotion-laden, unmediated 'language' of experience, which can't be interrogated for a more primary intellectual meaning. And as to where they came from, the ultimate ground of their representation, we cannot ask: that's extending everyday attitudes into areas where they didn't belong. These systems of symbolic form are not arbitrary creations, moreover, 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 had 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 had a logic of its own, expressing the forms of human feeling, and creating an inner lives. Certainly music did not denote as propositional language must, but it conveyed 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. But that's to be expected. Literature and music are different categories of art, each with their own approaches and accomplishments, as are the different disciplines noted above. Poetry should concentrate on what it does best, and give up its current games with language until it has mastered the relevant literature on truth (this article), meaning ([Duplicities of Meaning: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill](#)) and aesthetics ([Aesthetics of Modernist Poetry](#)).

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The New Formalism

What Arthur Miller wrote on the appearance of *The Formalist* magazine in 1990 was the simple truth: 'I am sure I will not be the only one grateful for *The Formalist*. Frankly, it was a shock to realize, as I looked through through the first issue, that I had nearly given up the idea of taking pleasure from poetry.'

Formalism arguably began much earlier, with Richard Wilbur, whose first collection, *The Beautiful Changes*, was published in 1947. And formalism in one sense had never been dead, since crafted verse was the staple of good poetry from De la Mare Graves, Muir, Auden, Spender, Amis, Larkin, Thomas, Betjeman, and Hill in England, and from Frost, Wylie, Teasdale, Robinson, Ransome, Meredith, Carruth, Booth, Hall, Davidson, Moss, Ferry, Cunningham, Nemerov, Lowell and Hollander in America. And countless others.

But the New Formalism was rather different, notably in its proselytizing role, its marked antagonism to free verse, and its stress on metrical correctness.

Richard Wilbur

Wilbur served with the Infantry during WWII, studied English at Harvard on the GI Bill, made friends there with Robert Frost, and had his first poem published by the *Saturday*

Evening Post. {30} His first collection, *The Beautiful Changes* (1947), was warmly received, and the second, *Ceremony and Other Poems* (1950), established him as a name to watch. Much-praised collections and translations followed. {31} Yet after many accolades, a successful academic career, a Pulitzer Prize and Poet Laureateship of the United States, a William Logan article in *The New Criterion* article could say of him: 'Wilbur had great gifts he didn't squander so much as stop using, at least for his poetry. He became our premier translator of Molière and Racine, but whether he abandoned poetry or poetry abandoned him has never been clear. He has continued to write, doing little more than toying with his verse, the way a great cat toys with prey. The poems, now simpler and less distractingly ornate, don't seem to matter much to him, and it's hard to see how they can matter much to the reader, even at their best.' {32}

But misgivings had been voiced much earlier by Marjorie Perloff {33} who said of the title poem of *The Things of This World* (1956) collection, which begins:

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple.
As false dawn. Outside the open window
The morning air is all awash with angels.

that, for all the New Criticism values of depersonalisation,

ambiguity, tension, and paradox so brilliantly displayed, the aloof conceit of washing viewed as disembodied angels took some swallowing. Could we forget the drudgery that laundry actually involved, and how washing actually looked from a New York apartment? Wasn't the St. Augustine-derived title, *Love Calls us to the Things of This World* more a studious, male-orientated avoidance of things as they were in the world? And though written in the peace and prosperity years of the Eisenhower administration, when Russian threats were contained, and both WWII and the Korean War could be set in the past, the poem was nevertheless curiously separated from cultural realities, perhaps being only a painless juggling with words that drew their resonances from literature more than the living speech of everyday joys and perplexities.

Likewise, David Perkins praised the grace, wit and intelligence of the title poem of the second collection, *Ceremony*, which begins:

A striped blouse in a clearing by Bazille
Is, you may say, a patroness of boughs
Too queenly kind toward nature to be kin.
But ceremony never did conceal,
Save to the silly eye, which all allows,
How much we are the woods we wander in.

but wondered whether such a dazzling style with its echoes of the English Metaphysical poets did not 'stifle passion and

conduce to a bland evasiveness.' {34}

Perloff and Perkins were writing from a committed avant garde position, but their charges make a claim for something crucial to contemporary poetry: openness to larger issues. Poets who neglect this dimension, who remain apart from their anxieties of their age, too much at ease with themselves, can dry up in later life, as Tennyson did, {35} and the cantankerous Pope did not. {36}

But deftness is not necessarily a handicap. In commenting on the accomplished but emotionally narrow work of an earlier poet, Christopher Ricks suggested that the better poems of A.E. Housman succeed because their rhythm and style mitigate and extend what their bald paraphrase is saying. {37} But perhaps it would be better to say that their lapidary exactness inserts them into the grain of language, on which they feed and rework, crystallizing the language into views that seem believable through one of the oldest of devices: creation of a literary personality. Housman was never a yokel, {38} and never drawn to country lasses, but the loneliness and anguish of his homosexuality condensed in poignant expressions of adolescent love, which he placed in a landscape of his own imagining. Wilbur is not an anguished writer, and his personality has been extended through translations of French playwrights.

Strengths

1. Very pleasing work was created (and continues to be created) under the aegis of New Formalism. It can be most

things:

playful and telling:

And it turned out in the platoon I had a clone
-- Same height, weight, eye color and so forth--
Named Morgan. Put fatigues on us
And our mothers couldn't tell us apart,
So naturally the cadre
Was constantly mistaking us too.

I'd stay out of sight and he'd yell, "Morgan,
Clean the shit cans!" or "Morgan, police

The wrappers--let's see some ass and elbows!"
And Morgan, the poor bastard, plodded
Week after week through this plain
Case of mistaken identity and never did catch on.

The last day, when we were fully trained and terrified
The cadre said, "Well, Morgan, how does it feel
To be a killing machine?"
I told him the name was Moran
And that it felt piss-poor. He stared at me like
He'd never seen me before, which of course he hadn't. {39}

Accomplished:

Tell it to me, Ralphie...

Ralphie, tell it to me under this lean tree...
Ralphie, tell me what's happening under the ground
That pulses the air lightly
Breaking these new buds
Over my head...

Tell me why drums beat
Out of the ground, Ralphie,
Tell me what a long winter it's been,
How the drum's talking itself alive,
How sweat (flows out of the ground, baby)
Makes leather sing... {40}

Moving:

Over forty years ago, I saw you
in my mirror mornings before the slow
days dawned. Working the hootowl shift miles
above Bohemia and in love with smiles
anyone gave, I was you to the core,
looked like you even then. Hung my hands in
pockets lightly exactly the way you did,
and wore the light blue pants.

Our names the same
signaled something I tried my best to grasp.
Maybe I have it now. But for you, Jimmy,
I would have remained in the north country
and never have known the freedom of road

and will. I was a slow rebel, double
for you in the smoky taverns of Oregon
where lost women and mournful men spilled their
lives on Saturday nights. {41}

Wry:

My buddy says this time I've got it bad.
My first love says she can't recall my name.
My baby says my singing make her sad.
My dog says that she loves me all the same.

My pastor says to walk the narrow path.
My coach says someone else will get the ball.
My God says I shall bend beneath his wrath.
My agent says Los Angeles may call. {42}

Ambitious:

You have half forgotten, you almost remember the dream
Of a native country whose language was joy
Despite the numerous crosses, the wide denial
Of an abundance flowing from the infinite
Founding the city upon the reformed heart
And sustaining the world through one small land.

It always was about this piece of land
Where a people held together by a dream
(Or compressed by surrounding pressures into a heart)

Found, between towering walls, the way to joy
Just for a moment that seemed infinite
Before the jaws of empire closed in denial. {43}

2. The New Formalists revived the dying art of verse-writing, and created magazines, courses, university appointments {44} publishing houses and bulletin boards {45} to further its appreciation. The world's poetry is largely in verse, and if that poetry is not read first and foremost as verse then we are struggling in a foreign tongue, one where we may broadly understand the words, but do not feel any exultation or chill in the blood, or any sense of a world beyond the prose meanings.

3. The New Formalists brought attention back to poetry as poetry, away from media stunts, political commitment and literary theory.

Weaknesses of the New Formalism

The New Formalism was a combative movement, {46} and the opposition soon retaliated, pointing out {47} that:

1. Much was flat-footed and unadventurous. The following poem is making fun of the situation by being so baldly written, but the metre betrays the sense into what could be more interestingly said in prose.

Just one profitable week at the office
Will offset a recent manuscript's rejection
And white-out bad press in the Book Review section

By granting almost every temporal wish.
And on days when faithful clients ignore your call,
When a slumping stock becomes more than an omen,
When you stagger home wasted as Willy Loman,
How easy to write a line and damn them all. {48}

2. Correctness was over-emphasized. The preferred metre was a strict iambic, and that heavy-handed requirement closed down the melodies that are played over the regularity in underlying metre — melodies needed to express the finer shades of emotional content, and respect the personalities of individual words. This poem has an unromantic story to tell, but the no-nonsense iambic beat finally alienates us from its pathos:

Sunday morning sitting in the pew
She prayed to know what she should do
If Haskell Trahan who she figured would
Should take her out again and ask her to.

For though she meant to do as she was told
His hands were warmer than the pew was cold
And she was mindful of him who construed
A new communion sweeter than the old. {49}

3. Verse became an end in itself: anything, no matter how trivial, could be written in strict forms, and was valuable to the extent that it demonstrated that reach. The skill is not in doubt in this poem, but the effect is not so much insouciance

or brio as heartlessness:

It's almost noon, you say? If so,
Time flies and I need not rehearse
The rosebud-theme of centuries of verse.
If you *must* go

Wait for a while, then slip downstairs
And bring us some chilled white wine,
And some blue cheese, and crackers, and some fine
Ruddy-skinned pears. {50}

4. Its practitioners were as dismissive of the opposition as the opposition became of them. Free verse requires an acute ear for sound and placing, but this the Formalists did not always develop or recognize in others. Words are too press-ganged by the metre in this otherwise simple and quiet poem:

My parents left a handsome stand uncut
but hacked out all the saplings and the brush.
On stormy nights with cottage windows shut,
we heard old boughs creak in the seawind's rush.

One by one the surviving pines were tried
and the Barrens grew more barren as they died. {51}

5. New Formalists seemed to be living in a time-warp, oblivious to the many concerns that Modernism (for all its

failings) tried to address, and sometimes to the everyday world of readers. The argument is not passé in this poem, but too much assembled from the Romantics props cupboard:

There'd be no music from Apollo's lyre,
Nor could the goddess Venus find this place.
His battered heart would be protected here
Against impostors wearing masks of truth.
There'd be no sun, no constellation's light.
And passion would replace this thing called love.
Narcissus was the one he'd follow now.
And so he'd live—the jailor of his soul. {52}

6. Technique became not a means of exploring emotional response, but of evading it. A good ear and clear eye are evident in this poem, but the essential theme, the consolations of art, is not so much explored as tacked on:

At last she stops to watch the paper dry
as if she guesses when to wait; to see
the deeper tones grow lighter as the eye
makes soft flushed hues combine in a mystery
which rarely grants itself, as if it chose
that paint and water now again make fresh
the secret at the centre of a rose,
that's only half-remembered in her flesh. {53}

Representatives

Many. {54} A few of the better known:

Frederick Turner (b. 1943). {55}

Gerry Cambridge (b. 1959). {56}

Bill Coyle (b. 1968). {57}

Dick Davis (b. 1945). {58}

Rhina P. Espaillat (b. 1932). {59}

Robert Francis (1901-87). {60}

Judson Jerome (1927-91). {61}

A.M. Juster (b. 1956). {62}

X. J. Kennedy (b. 1929). {63}

Paul Lake (b. 1951). {64}

Gail White (b. 1945). {65}

Jennifer Reeser (b. 1968). {66}

A. E. Stallings. (b. 1968). {67}

Ezines (plus magazines with online representation) that cater for New Formalist poetry:

Hypertexts (reviews and good anthology of NF poets)

<http://www.contemporaryrhyme.com/> Contemporary Rhyme (good selection in quarterly issues)

<http://www.barefootmuse.com/> (two issues a year with some 20 poets)

<http://www.ablemuse.com> (a review of metrical poetry, now back in expanded form)

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Poetry as Plain Language: Popular Postmodernism

Language poetry possibly began in 1971 with the NY magazine *This*, which in turn led, seven years later, to a magazine entitled *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. Its spiritual forefathers were Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein {1} and Louis Zukofsky, {2} and the movement drew on the anti-capitalist, sometimes Marxist, politics of the time, especially the writings of Lacan, Barthes and Foucault. Though initially opposed to the teaching establishment, preferring to operate through the small presses, the movement gradually drew closer to academia, before fragmenting and losing its intellectual ascendancy in the usual avant garde fashion. Many of its one-time members are still well known, however, and writing strongly: Charles Bernstein, {3} Ron Silliman {4} and Bob Perelman. {5}

Characteristics

Aims are best grasped by what the movement opposed: {6}

1. narrative: no story or connecting tissue of viewpoint or argument: poems often incorporate random thoughts, observations and sometimes nonsense. {7}
2. personal expression: not merely detached, the poems accept Barthe's thesis that the author does not exist. {8}
3. organization: poems are based on the line, not the stanza, and often that line is discontinuous or fragmentary: the poems reject any guiding sense of purpose. {9}
4. control: poems take to

extremes the open forms advocated by Williams and the Black Mountain School. 5. capitalist politics and/or bourgeoisie values. {10}

Some Examples

The above would seem to make language poetry bafflingly difficult, but generally it isn't. Who could not be charmed by Bernadette Mayer's
(<http://writing.upenn.edu/wh/about/mayer.html>)
Synesthetes at the Writers House. {11}

I'm pleased to announce
that staying at the Writers House
is like living under a multi-colored apple tree
in winter; synesthetes would tremble with pleasure
tempera paint and chalk make a formidable coat

of many colors, in summer pink and white blossoms fall on
your head
to the south here, a forest
to the east, only snow and a garden
to the north a road and forest
to the west forest, a blue halloween-observing house

With its playful tone and gentle mockery of social address, the poem is exactly about its subject, synaesthesia, which it aptly demonstrates later with *the sky looks blue which feels like stilettoes / Sophia's plant is green, just like an 'E'*.

Chronic Meanings

(<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/%7Eafilreis/88v/chronic-meanings.html>) has a looser associative thread of meaning, but all lines are opening words of everyday sentences: {12}

The phone is for someone.
The next second it seemed.
But did that really mean.
Yet Los Angeles is full.

Naturally enough I turn to.
Some things are reversible, some.
You don't have that choice.
I'm going to Jo's for.

Now I've heard everything, he.
One time when I used.
The amount of dissatisfaction involved.
The weather isn't all it's.
You'd think people would have.
Or that they would invent.
At least if the emotional.
The presence of an illusion.

Why so pleasing? Because the lines themselves make us want to know more. And because they obliquely follow on from each other. What is *Symbiosis of home and prison* but

staying put or confined in some way? 'Doing time' is serving a prison sentence, and 'superfluous' points out that time indeed stands still when we have nothing unusual to do: *Then, having become superfluous, time. And then.* And so on: the many teasing connections in the poem hardly need pointing out.

That sense of fun is apparent in (<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/thinking-i-think-i-think/>) Thinking I Think I Think by Charles Bernstein:

. . . Dusting the rigor mortis
for compos mentis. Rune is bursting
out all over a perfidious quarrel
sublates even the heckling at
the Ponderosa. A bevy of belts.
Burl Ives turned to burlap. Who
yelled that? Lily by the lacquer
(laparotomy). *I'm strictly here on
business, literary business.* May
I propose the codicil-ready cables?
Like slips gassing in the night.
Chorus of automatic exclusions.
Don't give me no label as long as I

am able. Search & displace, curse
& disgrace. Suppose you suppose,
circumstances remonstrating. . . {13}

Bernstein goes further by muddling phrases: *Like sl(h)ips*

g(p)assing in the night. By adding riddling remarks (in the full poem, the above is an excerpt): *Search & displace, curse & disgrace*. And thoughtful nonsense: *The man the man declined to be*. But it's fun, entertaining, not to be taken too seriously.

Though not deeply personal, poems have their own voices and takes on situations. Here is David Bromige sending up Rilke's *Herbsttag*. {14}

(<http://www.theeastvillage.com/tc/bromige/p3.htm>) Fall
(Rilke into Californian)

It's getting chilly, nights. If you don't have a pad by now,
Too bad. If you're not seeing someone
You're likely stuck that way, they went back to school.

Crack a book yourself. Write in Starbucks.
Go walkabout downtown. [Time passes]. Hey, lookit
the leaves, wind, etc. doing their thing. Rustle rustle.
Contrast and compare yourself. Cool!

Language poets are not always adverse to using old forms,
which they pull gentle fun of while still getting something
out of. An example is Douglas Barbour's
(<http://www.theeastvillage.com/tc/barbour/p3.htm>) breath
ghazal 17:{15}

hard for a breath i tarry harried

into the body of time no please

yet the lack of breath
s death even in movement the care

taking the earth & its air making
the ruined lands fair again

breath ghazal 17: by Douglas Barbour. The East Village
Poetry Web

And common to many is an exactness in the speaking voice:
they sound as a good radio script. Kit Robinson's *line 56*:
{16}

Hey, poetry lovers!
it's good to see you
here on the page
The white spaces
are looking good
today, huh?

Hey, I gotta admit
I'm not too clear on
what all the different

Things are that I'm actually
doing with you guys
I think maybe we have Bill

Speaking at your
show in England or
something like that

Appraisal

For all their playful, throw-away appearance, considerable knowledge and literary skill is needed for these poems. The fragments have to be entertaining, and they have to 'sit right' in the lines. The playful, the ludic, the 'just suppose' is an important element in art, and we'd be dull creatures not to respond. Naturally, being members of the avant garde, its exponents could lead critics a merry dance into the thickets of radical theory, {17} in which they may or may not have believed. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry is a clever art, sophisticated and fitfully entertaining. Perhaps it's not poetry as was, and undoubtedly it shirks larger responsibilities, but it anticipated our consumerist world of news snippets, ad men and political sound bites, becoming less radical when reality caught up with art.

Prose-Based Poetry

Introduction

When free verse lacks rhythmic patterning, appearing as a lineated prose stripped of unnecessary ornament and rhetoric, it becomes the staple of much contemporary work. The focus is on what the words are being used to say, and their authenticity. The language is not heightened, and the

poem differs from prose only by being more self-aware, innovative and/or cogent in its exposition. Nonetheless, what looks normal at first becomes challenging on closer reading — thwarting expectations, and turning back on itself to make us think more deeply about the seemingly innocuous words used. And from there we are compelled to look at the world with sharper eyes, unprotected by commonplace phrases or easy assumptions. Often an awkward and fighting poetry, therefore, not indulging in ceremony or outmoded traditions.

What is Prose?

If we say that contemporary free verse is often built from what was once regarded as mere prose, we shall have to distinguish prose from poetry, which is not so easy. Prose was once the lesser vehicle, the medium of everyday thought and conversation, what we used to express facts, opinions, humour, arguments, feelings and the like. And while the better writers developed individual styles, and styles varied according to their purpose and social occasion, prose of some sort could be written by anyone. Beauty was not a requirement, and prose articles could be rephrased without great loss in meaning or effectiveness. Poetry, though, had grander aims. William Lyon Phelps on Thomas Hardy's work: {17} 'The greatest poetry always transports us, and although I read and reread the Wessex poet with never-lagging attention — I find even the drawings in "Wessex Poems" so fascinating that I wish he had illustrated

all his books — I am always conscious of the time and the place. I never get the unmistakable spinal chill. He has too thorough a command of his thoughts; they never possess him, and they never soar away with him. Prose may be controlled, but poetry is a possession. Mr. Hardy is too keenly aware of what he is about. In spite of the fact that he has written verse all his life, he seldom writes unwrinkled song. He is, in the last analysis, a master of prose who has learned the technique of verse, and who now chooses to express his thoughts and his observations in rime and rhythm.'

And:

'If the work fails to survive, it will be because of its low elevation on the purely literary side. In spite of occasional powerful phrases, as:

What corpse is curious on the longitude
And situation of his cemetery!

the verse as a whole wants beauty of tone and felicity of diction. It is more like a map than a painting.'

And:

'Yet as a whole, and in spite of Mr. Hardy's love of the dance and of dance music, his poetry lacks grace and movement. His war poem, "Men Who March Away", is singularly halting

and awkward. His complete poetical works are interesting because they proceed from an interesting mind.'

Note the hallmarks of poetry then: *transports us, possession, soar away, unmistakable spinal chill, beauty of tone, felicity of diction, grace and movement*. Some of those excellences are also to be found in Phelps' own commentary. Prose only, of course: the piece does not lift into imaginative reveries, bring forth spiritual mysteries or explore the wellsprings of our human natures. But it makes some telling points, and the writing is flexible, urbane and sensitive. It's also rather dated. The engaging manner hides a good deal of literary artifice — suspicious to our minds: verging on oratory, attempting to win us over in advance of the facts, assuming what should be questioned more closely. But that was no doubt the literary style of the time, a quieter version of the poetry that Phelps holds up to our admiration:

O Lily of the King! low lies thy silver wing,
And long has been the hour of thine unqueening;
And thy scent of Paradise on the night-wind spills its sighs,
Nor any take the secrets of its meaning.
O Lily of the King! I speak a heavy thing,
O patience, most sorrowful of daughters!
Lo, the hour is at hand for the troubling of the land,
And red shall be the breaking of the waters.

From *Lilium Regis* by Francis Thompson.

Contemporary Poetry Examples

How very different is generally the poetry of today. The three examples below come from *The Academy of American Poets*, {18} which spreads the net wide, but does try to present the best of modern and contemporary work. Copyright restrictions allow only a few lines, but each poem can be found by Internet search.

I had sex with a famous poet last night
and when I rolled over and found myself beside him I
shuddered
because I was married to someone else,

From *The Star-Spangled Banner* by Denise Duhamel.
Southern Illinois University Press, 1999.

'I wonder
if there are any catfish in this pond?
It seems like a perfect place for them.'

From: *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* by Richard Brautigan, published by Houghton Mifflin.

It was taken some time ago.
At first it seems to be
a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks

blended with the paper;

From: *The Circle Game* by Margaret Atwood.

What can we say of these styles: appropriate, unaffected, a trifle flat? Close to prose, in fact. Remove the line arrangements and the sentences would slip unnoticed into a contemporary short story. Something like: "I wonder if there are any catfish in this pond? It seems like a perfect place for them," she said, glancing up at the man who was now trying to retrieve the ball from the tangle of weeds into which it had fallen.'

Story Telling

And that may be their intention. The poems tell a story, present a situation, extract something from a world familiar to us. Modest in their aims, the poems show things as through plain glass: life without overt shapings into grand narratives or marked by portentous underlinings. That is how life is, we admit, the way we are. We can read more into the incidents, but are not compelled to do so. Sympathetic observation of character, an ear for dialogue, creation of scene through telling detail — that is what we look for: the storyteller's art. Hardy showed the way, and Margaret Atwood is also a celebrated novelist. But is this really all that poetry aims at? Wouldn't we be better off with the full story or magazine article of which these seem pared-down versions? We absorb prose at a more comfortable rate

than poetry, and contemporary work is hardly popular. Why restrict the readership still further?

Because poetry today, or this type of poetry, focuses on the word itself. Just the word, without ornament or emotional shading, or any regimentation with rhetorical devices. And for these, among other reasons:

Heritage: the way Modernism poetry has developed through Thomas Hardy's occasional pieces, Ezra Pound's interest in Chinese ideograms, Wallace Stevens's Symbolist credo and William Carlos Williams's homespun philosophy.

Honesty: to avoid the corrupting influence of language in business, politics and advertising. Words are a bedrock, whose plain use guarantees sincerity.

Originality: being avant garde, the poetry must oppose the establishment, rejecting the products of a privileged or extended education.

The attitudes are not built on sand, but they do make large assumptions. But there is a further point. Even supposing these reasons were compellingly self-evident, the poetry would fail if it were simply as we have supposed: pared-down articles, filleted short stories. But it isn't. Once free of conventional usage, words can adopt new strategies.

Prose-Based Strategies

Here are a few, with original sources:

Pacings that allow words or phrases their proper significance. (<https://poets.org/poem/call-me-ishmael>)
Circulation. And long long /Mind every/ Interest Some how
mind and every long

Switches in mid line or stanza that disrupt or reverse expectations (<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/thus-speak-the-chromograph>). Elini Sikelianos. Thus, Speak the Chromograph

Abrupt changes in viewpoint or of characters speaking. (<https://poets.org/poem/scrambled-eggs-and-whiskey>)
Hayden Carruth: Scrambled eggs and whiskey / in the false-dawn light. Chicago,

Variety in pace or attack: there is no metre to be negotiated. (<https://poets.org/poem/coming-light>) Mark Strand: the coming of love, the coming of light./ You wake and the candles are lit as if by themselves,

Fresh expression: (<https://poets.org/poem/coming-light>)
John Canaday: I dream of grass so green it speaks.

Make large leaps in sense:
(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58816/blessing-the-boats>) Lucille Clifton: water waving forever/ and may you in your innocence/ sail through this to that

Phrasing based on units of sound rather than syntax:
(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54124/the-invention-of-streetlights>) Cole Swenson: (the night has houses)/ and the shadow of the fabulous/ broken into handfuls

Repetition of words or phrases that reiterate but make no comment: (<https://poets.org/poem/nursing-home>) E.M. Schorb : There are more women than / men in the nursing home and / more men than old doctors.

Antithesis as structure, not argument:
(<https://poets.org/poem/mr-grumpledumps-song>) Shel Silverstein: Everything's wrong,/ Days are too long,/ Sunshine's too hot,/ Wind is too strong.

Extended personification:

(<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/eyes-fastened-with-pins>) Charles Simic: How much death works,/ No one knows what a long/ Day he puts in.

Inconsequential remarks linked by common tone:

(<https://poets.org/poem/northern-pike>) James Wright: We prayed for the road home./ We ate the fish./There must be something very beautiful in my body,/ I am so happy..

Successes

It is these strategies, and many others, that account for the modest successes of this style. Could these be phrased in more traditional forms? Yes, but they wouldn't be the same poem: their rightness depends on the way they reflect the awkwardness and general untidiness of life.

Shortcomings 1: Emotional Charge

Now for the debit side: what could be the shortcomings of so plain a style? A first point to stress is the variety in the work, the very different themes, aims and levels of accomplishment in contemporary poetry. We cannot reasonably corral such abundance under one heading, and then stamp it with marks of approval or disapproval. Nonetheless, there remain two elements that readers may find largely absent: emotional depth and a compelling truth.

Here, to introduce the first, is an anthology piece of a century back:

'Let us consider, too, how differently young and old are affected by the words of some classic author, such as Homer or Horace. Passages, which to a boy are but rhetorical commonplaces, neither better nor worse than a hundred others which any clever writer might supply, which he gets by heart and thinks very fine, and imitates, as he thinks, successfully, in his own flowing versification, at length come home to him, when long years have passed, and he has had experience of life, and pierce him, as if he had never before known them, with their sad earnestness and vivid exactness. Then he comes to understand how it is that lines, the birth of some chance morning or evening at an Ionian festival, or among the Sabine hills, have lasted generation after generation, for thousands of years, with a power over the mind, and a charm, which the current literature of his own day, with all its obvious advantages, is utterly unable to rival. Perhaps this is the reason of the medieval opinion about Virgil, as if a prophet or magician; his single words and phrases, his pathetic half-lines, giving utterance, as the voice of Nature herself, to that pain and weariness, yet hope of better things, which is the experience of her children in every time.' {19} Is this prose? In one sense, yes, but possibly poetry too. What it says is a commonplace, but readers may sense in it an emotional power that is largely missing from contemporary poetry. With its playfulness, its variety of subject matter and width of social register, poetry

today has accomplished many things. But with the populist tone has also come an unwillingness to take risks, or construct a heightened awareness of ourselves and surroundings.

Shortcomings 2: Larger Truth

Now what we might call a compelling truth. The sombre splendour of the Newman passage does not lie wholly in the rhetoric, but what the passage says. We have to accept its meaning to admit the power. Literary wizardry can certainly set content off to its best advantage, but it cannot wholly *create* that content — not unless we accept that old jibe about poetry: 'Poetry is something which appeals to the emotions and feelings. The Quran, on the other hand is designed to inspire by arousing consciousness, conscience and will. When did poetry create a world movement, a civilization and empires? Orientalists who read the Quran as if it were poetry are worse than those who pick up a text book on science and read it as if it were a novel.' {20}

Many novels are entertainments, creations where we can explore the possibilities of human behaviour without crippling responsibility, but they are not serious. Nor is much contemporary poetry. Original and entertaining in small doses, the poems can tire us in the end with their formulaic cleverness and connections too easily made — as in these examples *from The Academy of American Poets:*

Palea by Tory Dent (ic, v)

Homage to Sharon Stone by Lynn Emanuel (v, t)

Hymn to the Neck by Amy Gerstler (ic, v)

Monologue for an Onion by Suji Kwock Kim (ic, v)

The Blue Cup by Minnie Bruce Pratt (v)

Last Night I Dreamed of Chickens by Jack Prelutsky (n)

The Cities Inside Us by Alberto Ríos (v, ic)

Nearing Autobiography by Pattiann Rogers (v, ic)

Formulaic cleverness? These are the shortcomings, I'd suggest, of the poems tagged:

t. trite: a bald observation is tacked on rather than developed through the poem, making the ending trite and unconvincing.

ic. intellectual conceit: the intellectual framework is arbitrary and extended beyond what is illuminating.

v. vacuous: the poem ends up saying nothing of importance.

t. trivial: the subject or theme is not novel, or developed in any interesting way.

c. clichéd: a language not merely undistinguished but too clichéd for even a local newspaper.

Perhaps their authors have written better, when the fault lies with the selections — those in *Modern American Poets*

{21} seem better — but the shortcomings are common to this style of writing, which the very directness cannot hide. The subject matter is not the problem. When we turn to Academy poems that deal with truly harrowing themes, we are met with the same flat reportage:

racial discrimination: Worms

racial slurs: Niggerlips

religious intolerance: Looking for Omar

bodily change: Mastectomy

revenge: Lucky

Are we being fair? We have asked for a faithful representation of life, and these, their authors and editors might claim, provide exactly that. They tell it straight. The poems don't make emotional capital out of the incidents but leave facts to speak for themselves. But they are not 'the facts', but information/opinions/feelings that have been created, selected and presented. We can reasonably ask why, and judge the effect of that presentation. Their tone may be fairly neutral, but is a tone all the same, establishing *some* relationship between author and reader. We take our cue from that tone. Why should we want to read them anyway? Newspapers report on real life, on people or events important to us. Novels generate interest through plot and character conflict. Neither can be claimed for these poems, and any 'universality of theme' is ruled out by their modest statements.

The poets concerned are serious, well read in English literature, the winners of numerous grants and prizes, and often run courses or workshops at postgraduate level. Unless the poetry world is a gigantic hoax run for and by a self-perpetuating priesthood of incompetents, is there not something we are missing?

Perhaps an older view of poetry. We have characterized a prose-based poetry as one stripped of unnecessary ornament. In fact, it may be better to think of rhetoric, that of classical poetry with its elitist and cumbersome devices, as having been replaced by another more appropriate to everyday use. Out has gone artifice, rhythmic subtlety and grand statements, and in its place is the authentic speech of real people in real situations. What is heightened about this language? Nothing: it is not heightened or literary, indeed the very opposite. What distinguishes it from what we use every day of our lives? That is its strength. It is rooted in quotidian usage and draws its strength and *raison d'être* from that usage. Language rooted in current social discourse, in current concerns. True, it looks back to past heroes for its styles, but these only saw more clearly what was really needed.

Pros and Cons

We might therefore say that the style has these advantages:

Versatile, accommodating most themes and approaches.

Unpretentious: speech of real people in real situations.

Contemporary, unhindered by outmoded forms or preoccupations.

Easy to write (though possibly difficult to achieve outstanding results).

And these dangers:

Elementary in literary skills, and apt to be unmemorable.

Prosaic in thought and/or themes, sometimes trivial.

More clever than genuinely moving.

Infectual in translating older (formal) poetry.

In summary: if these styles aim at what prose at its best once achieved, they do so by very different routes. And that we have to bear in mind when we ask: Do they engage our interest and sympathies? Do they fittingly express themselves? Do they say something in the end worth saying? Have they achieved something difficult or impossible in any other form?

Defamiliarisation

Theory doesn't help us here. It is by puzzling out what these poems are saying that we are led into probing a world that we have hitherto too much taken for granted. Adherents would argue that a prosaic style is a decided advantage, a heightened language would only bewitch us in the old ways of poetry. Just as Wittgenstein's philosophy tried to untangle the conundrums of language used beyond its proper remit, it's the contemporary poet's task to look at life squarely, without the swelling orchestra of feelings. {22} Hence also the interest in deconstruction, which stresses the arbitrariness of language, and the corresponding need to look carefully at individual words and how they are used in a particular text.

Are the results poetry? Obviously so, in the sense that the installations etc. of contemporary painters and sculptors are art: they try to understand the visual world in a fuller but non-scientific sense. It may be that this poetry is not very popular, with the public {23} or even academia, {24} drawing its acclaim from small groups of enthusiasts. {25} The poetry generally lacks overt emotional appeal, and does not provide — and is not intended to provide — readers with a sense of beauty or their significance in the world. Uncompromising, playful or intellectually austere, the poetry can also need the exegesis of literary theory to fully appreciate. Is too much read into these simple structures and apparently trivial statements? Their advocates say no:

these very features become the placeholders for searching questions we are provoked to ask: of social issues, human relationships, and — most of all — language itself. {26} Other articles on this site suggest that these aims are doubtful of attainment. {27}

Contemporary Translation

However we may view these styles — unpretentious, emotionally flat, whether used seriously (Prynne and Ashbery) or playfully (Language Poetry) — they are generally a poor medium for translating the classics of European literature. 'For making sense of our contemporary world in terms of the everyday minutiae of existence, the discontinuous prose style of contemporary poetry serves admirably, but poets have generally had grander longings. They have wanted to impart an imperishable beauty to what is fleeting in our chaotic and problematic lives. They have wanted to explore matters that had no existence outside their intricately-constructed expression. And they have wanted to say things that no sane person would probably ever conceive of saying — creating an essential, full and vital representation of the world where other representations are abstract and abbreviated.' {28}

Academic translators no doubt find today's styles easier to write in, since they are basically prose, and a prose with restricted facilities for aesthetic and semantic shaping. Students with a limited knowledge of English literature will certainly find them easier to read: they can be skimmed like the other yards of text they have to get through each week.

But these translations are not the genuine article: they turn what was beautiful, moving and memorable into the mundane. Translation is not a competition, {29} of course, but I will end with some examples of current difficulties.

Euripides' Medea. George Theodoridis (2005)

Corinthian women, you know that I have to suffer an insufferable thing, a thing that has worn my soul away. I'm no longer alive!

I refuse all of life's charms and I seek death. Yes, death, Corinthians, because my husband, who was my whole world, had become the most evil of all men. {30}

Translation has been made afresh from the original Greek. The diction is energised, but the meaning is not close to the original and the tone is flattened into shouting.

Racine's Phaedra. V, 6. A.S. Kline (2003)

Panic took them, and deaf as they were then,
They recognised neither voice nor the rein.
Their master exhausted himself in useless struggle,
While in the blood-wet foam they stained their bridles.
They even say some saw, in this wild confusion,
A god who goaded their dusty flanks: a vision.
Their fear drove them headlong over the rocks,

The axle groaned and shattered, brave Hippolytus
Saw his whole chariot break into fragments.
He himself fell entangled in the harness.
Forgive my sorrow. That cruel sight to see
Will be an eternal source of tears to me. {31}

Rhymes are approximate and the lines do not scan. But the danger lies not in accepting the pedestrian and flat-footed as today's new normal, but the assumption that effective and elevated verse is no longer relevant. Ideally, we expect the translation to 'work' in the tradition of English verse as the original does in the tradition of French verse, different conventions notwithstanding. Tony Kline generally writes a very serviceable 'free verse' but is not overly concerned with the aesthetic dimension — any more, I suspect, than are the many students who use his generously-provided translations. Yet it's through the elevated aesthetic dimension, from overall shape of the play down to minute particulars of word choice, that the original has remained alive, why we still read it. Those larger dimensions deserve to be better carried over.

Horace Odes IV 7. Rosanna Warren (2002)

All gone, the snow: grass throngs back to the fields,
the trees grow out new hair;
Earth follows her changes, and subsiding streams
jostle within her banks. {32}

Over-literal, with none of Horace's charm, polish and lapidary dexterity. The piece is unfortunately typical of many in a recent anthology, where all contributions come from accredited and/or prize-winning poets and translators. Clearly, we're in a different, more mundane world here, however much Harold Bloom may champion its virtues.

Dante: Divine Comedy. Robin Kilpatrick (2013)

At one point midway on our path through life,
I came around and found myself now searching
through a dark wood, the right way blurred and lost.

How hard it is to say what that wood was,
a wilderness, savage, brute, harsh and wild.
Only to think of it renews my fear!
So bitter, that thought, that death is hardly more so.
But since my theme will be the good I found there
I mean to speak of other things I saw. {33}

Fairly accurate but not rhymed: Dante's sinewy and compact verse is rendered as a lightly-running half-prose half-verse.

Ovid: Tristia VI 6. David Slavitt (1999)

Some translations are more inventions. In Christopher Martin's useful paperback Ovid in English, {34} presenting 123 excerpts from 77 translators, we find the following

introduction to the lines below: 'David R. Slavitt's beautiful translations bring Ovid's exile poems finally into their own for the contemporary English audience, capturing the poignancy of these often difficult laments in sturdy couplets of six or five stresses.'

Let us imagine a ruin — say of some small Greek temple
in an out of the way place, where the god happened
to speak or spare or warn or simply to show herself,
nearly levelled, say by an earthquake, but one
single column left, holding up its corner
by which we can imagine the rest of the structure.
Which is the more affecting, the ruined part of the building,
or that surviving piece of it, forlorn,
bereaved of the rest? My life is the ruin; yours, dear wife,
is that still-standing beautiful pillar, vessel
for the spirit that yet abides. How else to declare
my love for you, who deserve a less wretched
though not better or more deserving husband? My powers
are not what they were. Clumsy sincerity
must speak with its thick tongue, stammering out thanks
and affection, unadorned but still heartfelt.

But where the Latin talks about a spar remaining from a shipwreck, David Slavitt has introduced a long passage of his own invention on Greek ruins and their cause. Why? Even in quatrains, limiting and only doubtfully suitable, the piece can be fairly closely rendered as: {35}

Whatever little now remains I rest
in you. I know that always you will care
for us, and keep your wits about you, lest
men strip the panels from the shipwreck there.

They raven for our blood, as will the fold
goat on the wolf unwatched with hungry thoughts
to snatch at us before our case is cold,
or vultures drop on an abandoned corpse.

We have our brave supporters, but it's you
who largely drove them off, for which goodwill
my wretchedness is witness, here as true
as griefs with which I feel the burdens still.

The classics have become a world of diminished
expectations, where prosaic lines serve for prosaic ends.
Translation of poetry into poetry is extraordinarily difficult,
of course, but there seems less warrant in insisting that all
poetry today adopt flat-footed and graceless styles. Even the
Movement poets generally wrote better. {36}

Poet laureates have many thankless tasks, but is this really
adequate to the occasion?

It should be private, the long walk
on bereavement's hard stones;
and when people wave, their hands
should not be mobile phones,

nor their faces lenses;
so your heart dressed in its uniform. {37}

And is this padding out of the obvious worthy of first prize in the 2017 UK Poetry Society's competition?

Six boys, a calf's tongue each, one task —
to gulp each slick muscle down in turn,
to swallow each vein whole and not give
back a word, a sign, our mothers' names.
The scab stripped off, the ritual learned —
five boys step out across an empty field. {38}

Poetry was once a good deal more than this, and may have to be again if deserving of intelligent appreciation.

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The Death of Literary Criticism

Introduction: An Anecdote

Fifty years ago, when I was completing my tertiary education in quite another subject at Exeter, a cautionary tale was given to candidates sitting Finals in English. There had been a student, they were warned, who'd wrecked his chances with a silly display of the obvious. The examination paper had asked for the usual critical assessments of the literary figures then in vogue. Everyone knew that these assessments, however individually expressed, would be material extracted from the respected books, papers and studies that he'd have read as his tutor directed. Everyone knew what this material was, and where it came from. And everyone knew that the material had its strengths and weaknesses, which the student should understand and indicate. But, unfortunately, this student, our latter-day scholar gypsy, instead of incorporating the material in cogent essays of his own, simply jotted down the references that applied — author, title, date and summary — and added a connecting thread of argument. Do not follow his example, the candidates were told. The man was failed.

Of course appearances had to be kept up. {17} Nor were original views expected of undergraduates, since these were unlikely to be penetrating or soundly based, and so would only muddy the water. Like all academic subjects, English had an accepted body of knowledge, and a preferred method of extending that knowledge. A long apprenticeship in

scholarship, through a PhD and then modest submissions to learned, peer-reviewed journals, was the way to go, and would indeed be scrutinized at each application for employment.

The Literary Article Today

These thoughts have been with me when reading the exceptionally useful material that readers may like to consult for themselves on www.academia.edu . {1} I started with Terry Eagleton's *How To Read a Poem*, {2} by no means a simple or introductory work, and perhaps not even a usual one these days. Under the opening chapter, entitled *The End Of Criticism*, Professor Eagleton explains:

I first thought of writing this book when I realised that hardly any of the students of literature I encountered these days practised what I myself had been trained to regard as literary criticism. Like thatching or clog dancing, literary criticism seems to be something of a dying art. Since many of these students are bright and capable enough, the fault would seem to lie largely with their teachers. The truth is that quite a few teachers of literature nowadays do not practise literary criticism either, since they, in turn, were never taught to do so.

(For readers wanting more, I should add that, after analysing as introduction a popular Auden poem, Professor Eagleton goes on to assert, *'I have argued that literary theorists may safely plead not guilty to the charge of having*

sabotaged literary criticism'. But that's not the charge, I suggest, but rather that modern critical theory does not illuminate poetry in any helpful way. So while Professor Eagleton certainly applies close-reading throughout the book, the sensibility remains that of the academic and not the practitioner or poetry lover. Each poem's diction is placed in its socio-historic settings exceptionally well, but the readings don't generally reach into the beating heart of the poem, to what really counts.)

But, continuing our theme, that dearth of literary criticism seems borne out by papers and articles on Academia.edu, even those hailing from earlier times. Some papers are purely factual — the correspondence between leading poets, the social movements of the times, the scattered bibliography of non-English poets — not riveting material but often essential to proper understanding. But the remainder is not generally literary criticism. Nor is it critical theory proper, an assessment of theory from larger viewpoints or disciplines. What the papers generally do is take for granted the status of leading names, poets and theoreticians, and then write deft, intriguing and carefully attributed accounts that weave in critical theory and poetry texts into a coherent and engaging whole.

Let me give an example: Matthew Hall's *J.H. Prynne and the Late-Modern Epic* as it appears on the Academia.edu site. {3} The paper is intricately written, and starts with a brief history of Postmodernism, which places Prynne in context.

Then, to give a flavour of its style, come the following, densely-written lines, to which I add the bracketed explication, summary or query. The numbers refer to Hall's extensive references:

Prynne's lexical, historical, scientific, philosophic and poetic references add to the obfuscation of a singular identity within the poem. (Wide reference prevents any single meaning being drawn from the poem.)

The proposition of reading a text with this multifaceted complexity forces the reader into a structural analysis of history, time, etymology, transcendental philosophy, prosody and the overlaying sources which compromise the authority of the written text. (When analysed, the multifaceted references compromise the authority of the text). Each of Prynne's poems resist cohesive exaction and align themselves within the possibilities of expression. 5 (These references in Prynne's poems cannot be extracted as a fully coherent statement but only one of possible directions). The Marxist literary theorist and Cambridge Lecturer Drew Milne establishes the reading of Prynne within a definitive framework designed to extol implicit expressions of knowledge, as well as to enable the communication of tacit knowledge presented within the poem. (Reading the poems is controlled by implicit structures and understandings). Regarding Prynne's poetic works, he writes: Language is understood as a condition of possibility rather than a site of communicative action. (Language is a

possibility rather than a sure means of communication.)

The decisive issue is whether the recognition of expressive contradictions can mediate its inclusion within determinate structures of communication and not remain trapped within the fundamental presuppositions of language which encode experience. (Can the structures of language, where the presuppositions encode experience, allow such contradictions of expression? In short, can Prynne's contradictions still communicate?) Prynne's late-modernist writing places itself at the cusp of transgressional traditional representations of knowledge and creates from the poem an open field of inquiry. (Prynne's poetry spearheaded such breaks with tradition, and made poems an open field of enquiry — i.e. they do not 'close' on any particular meaning.) Adorno states that: 'form [is] the sediment of content'; (N.B: this has to be seen in context: Adorno notes how often myth and irrationality have controlled the western narrative, and that these past 'forms' will persist to influence the future. {4}) and in a separate argument that, 'form seeks to bring the particular to speech through the whole'. 6 (Adorno regards authentic works of (modern) art as social monads. The unavoidable tensions within them express unavoidable conflicts within the larger sociohistorical process from which they arise and to which they belong. These tensions enter the artwork through the artist's struggle with sociohistorically laden materials, and they call forth conflicting interpretations, many of which misread either the work-internal tensions or their connection to conflicts in

society as a whole. Adorno sees all of these tensions and conflicts as "contradictions" to be worked through and eventually to be resolved. {4})

These statements replicate Olson and Creely's thought, that 'form is never more than an extension of content', (As the earlier, breath-based, open-form Black Mountain School of Poetry asserted.)

and thereby an examination of this form can produce meaning. 7 (If of course the previous assertion holds, i.e. we forget that the Black Mountain School was a largely abortive experiment.)

And so on for several pages. But once the convoluted expression is straightened out, Hall's interpretations of Prynne's work become perfectly sensible. These are not controversial positions among Postmodernists who believe art is inextricably bound up with the larger issues of society.

The same paper is much simpler written on the Australian site. {4} Again Prynne is placed in context, but with more biographic and bibliographic detail. But we still get such things as:

A typical characteristic of a Prynne poem contextualises the subjective in a fragmented form and strands him at the periphery of the communicative framework. Prynne forces subjective instances of remembrance and communication towards indeterminacy. Late-modernist poetics represent a

resistance to the singular expression of the self, which is based on a denial of early modernist narrative traditions. . . . The overlay of images and thoughts preclude the reading of a consistent series of ideas and forces the reader to dissect frameworks of definition so as to make cognisant the tacit knowledge of the poem. The overlaying matrices of information which typify the formal structure of Prynne's poetry signal the necessity of connecting each word's outlying referential sources to breach the meaning of language as it is used within the poem. The poetic images of Prynne can, if not fully, be partially unveiled through unearthing the sequences of the naturally occurring interconnections and polyvalent elements in such images.

Which is probably being said is that 1. Prynne fragments the poet's utterances, making expression and memory into indeterminate things. 2. In this way, late Postmodernism reverses the Modernist pre-eminence of the author. 3. The play of thoughts and images preclude any consistent reading. 4. The reader nonetheless tries to make sense of these thoughts and images, constructing ways in which they could be true, and these ways, or structures, are in some sense what the poem is about. 5. The individual words nonetheless retain some of their usual references (i.e. meaning), and these references disrupt our sense of the poem's overall meaning. All the same, 6. Prynne's poetic images can be broadly grasped by understanding the often complex ways these images function outside the poem in everyday use.

Again, put in plain English, the interpretation is not outlandish, but we do need to see examples of these features to check that we are understanding Hall's comments properly. Unfortunately, as is often the case with more challenging Postmodernist exposition, such examples aren't given, anywhere in the paper, so that matters remain theoretical.

But Hall does urge us to work hard on Prynne's poetry, adding: *The reader is given the task of establishing an influential portion of the text, and uncovering the references codified and coexisting within their reading of the poem and the contextual, socio-historical references which constitute and define the object of study.* ⁹ *It is my obvious contention that to begin to understand Prynne, one needs to work at it, with some rigour: assiduously reading and rereading lines, words and phrases until units of coherence start to form. Readers should be asked to side with Reeve and Kerridge, who ask us to 'read on, beyond the sense of impasse'* ¹⁰ *and expect moments of severe frustration as ideal and even necessary.*

Again, surely, Hall will provide an example that does indeed succeed in identifying a meaning or meanings beyond the initial frustrations. But again no, we're only given the Reeve and Kerridge reference (N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much : The Poetry of J.H. Prynne* (Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 1995), which (in the one chapter

available as Google books, Lyricism) {5} spins out the significance into exceptionally wide readings in the European tradition. The poem discussed, *The Wound, Day and Night*, taken from Prynne's 1969 *The White Stones*, is an attractive one, indeed beautiful, but also one that, alas, shows Prynne has no intellectual grasp whatever of his geological material. The poet is singing about what he doesn't understand. Moreover, even on the mundane textual level, it should be noted, Tim Love finds problems with the simple logic of poems and exposition. {6}.

But suppose we put these difficulties aside, and continue with the paper. Section II starts:

The incursion of patterns of travel, trekking, and nomadological pathways invariably register with the reader in reference to Odysseus, Dante, and Gilgamesh, but there are also numerous instances in which this work should be read against modern mythological and epical works. Prynne's nomadic poetry and the sense of exile it imbues in the reader establishes the poems as resting points or contingent moments of thought and reflection. These poems act as a gathering place for a personal assessment of concepts of distance, loss, and the desire to return home.

This is a large claim. Because Prynne references a wide range of material, the poems take on an epic character. But do they? Critical ingenuity may find all kinds of allusions and

references, but an epic poem is more than neat weaving together of wide-flung allusions. The section continues:

This desire to return to 'sacred origins' is implicitly unified with the Heideggerian concept of poetic dwelling, as has been highlighted by most modern critics. The late-modernist aspects of Prynne's work often read his work exclusively through modern epics such as Pound's Cantos, Olson's The Maximus Poems, Dorn's Gunslinger, and Zukofsky's "A". Equally important to the structure and meaning of Prynne's poetic is its placement against the writings of Wordsworth. The patterns presented in Tintern Abbey represent a preliminarily established form of a personal, philosophical and imaginative epic of which Wordsworth never completed, and of which The Prelude, Recluse and The Excursion represent portions.'

Now the paper is coming perilously close to name-dropping. In fact, of course, as I've tried to show, Prynne's poems are not that difficult, at least the earlier ones, being only exercises in extended but incomplete association. {7} Poets can write as they please, surely so, but dressing matters up in abstruse theory only lays us open to charges of hyperbole and pretence.

The paper now shifts to Olson's Maximus poems:

'Olson embraced throughout The Maximus Poems caused him to relapse into acts of comparison, which detail the

natural and human realms but leave the actions of men as impotent to enact change. Olson began to stress that 'at root (or stump) what is, is no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things, these are the terms of the reality contemporary to us — and the terms of what we are.'{14} Anthony Mellors states that Maximus, the Herculean figure of Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, 'represents a shift from the isolated lyric ego to a universal poetic self which embraces both the specific facts of history and the archetypes that supposedly underlie and give spiritual meaning to those facts [and objects].'¹⁵ Olson fought for a syncretistic unifying system as a means to 'stay in the human universe and not to be led to partition reality at any point in any way.'¹⁶

'Prynne also makes an appearance in Olson's Maximus Poems, appealing to Olson to accept the responsibility of his poetry to make a political statement. Olson's acknowledgement of Prynne's request and relapse into the naturalist system of writing disengages him from the political implications and concretises his position as a naturalist, purposefully removed from the situation.

The paper continues for another two and a half pages of densely-written (but nonetheless interesting) text and ends with 38 references. It would take far more time than I have available, or the reader probably patience for, to comment in detail on Matthew Hall's paper. But the approach should be clear. It is one in which the poetry under review becomes a

peg on which to place erudition of a high order, often mountains of such erudition. To this treatment the poem may be securely anchored when it's admirably clear and successful, as are many of Prynne's early poems, but only tangentially so in the later and much more opaque work. (Prynne's problems are not theory, I suspect, but the falling away from early promise that afflicts so many poets. The novel association continues, but the associations seem more private and arbitrary.)

Lest the Prynne articles be seen as a special case, we should note a similar preference for speculative approaches over detailed reading in many other papers on Academia.edu. A few examples taken at random:

: Darcy, A 2017 *Melancholy in Contemporary Irish Poetry: The 'Metre Generation' and Mahon*. C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings, 5(1): 4, pp. 1-26, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.13>

: Nakkouch, T. 2012 *Comparative Literature and the Question of Theory 1*
https://www.academia.edu/36606817/Comparative_Literature_and_the_Question_of_Theory_1

: Siraganian, L. 2011 *Wallace Stevens's Fascist Dilemmas and FreeMarket Resolutions*
https://www.academia.edu/577135/_Wallace_Stevenss_Fascist_Dilemmas_and_Free_Market_Resolutions_

Many papers are much less technical. Let me give just one

of the 16,182 papers currently available on Ezra Pound in Academia.edu. Mark Byron's *Chinese Poetical Histories in Ezra Pound and Gary Snyder* {1} is a fascinating paper, engagingly written in the best academic manner and displaying a wide knowledge of Pound scholarship. But does the paper really accomplish its stated intention?

But adopting the notion of historical poetics as delineated by Yopie Prins (2), in short, where attention to the histories implied in poetic form and genre is matched by inquiry into their specific applications through close reading I will show how these exemplars in each poet's career not only embody historical arguments in their creative repurposing of antique materials, but enjoin their readers to understand how such poetic interventions in history produce their own histories, demanding a complex double vision: East and West, ancient and modern, poetic composition and critique. This results in the kinds of critical reading practices to which Simon Jarvis refers in his own programme of historical poetics, where works of art are records of a historical process of thinking-through-making and puts the historical moment of poetic composition into play with poetry's architectonic forces, histories of genre and form, and histories of reception.

I'd have thought not. Gary Snyder's Chinese wasn't sufficient to properly elucidate Wang Wei's *Deer Stockade*, {9} for example, and I'm not sure that Byron reads Chinese if he can write, '*Chinese prosodic convention, where articles do not appear separately but are implied in the context.*'

Lack of articles is not a poetic convention but a feature of the language. We are still looking at Chinese poetry through Modernism's eyes, without understanding how the poetry actually works. {10} It is a good deal more than metonymy (images substituting for thing meant, generally mood creation through evocative examples), or ekphrasis (transferring the visual into the literary domain). Bluntly put, we really want to know if the Pound or Snyder translations are any good, and, if so, how? Do they penetrate the essence of Chinese poetry in any illuminating way? Is the resulting east-west aesthetics they or Modernism developed a useful one? On all these key points the paper is silent. The excellence of Pound's and Snyder's performances is taken as a given.

Personally — when written sensibly — I find all such papers to be agreeably thought-provoking, but they generally say little on the poem as such, or on poetry as an art form. Arguably, much of the contemporary poetry under review is not poetry at all, moreover, but fragmentary expositions on personal observations, semantics and theories of meaning — interesting no doubt, but better tackled through traditional philosophical discussion. If we can't understand a Postmodernist poem, it will have no emotive appeal, and therefore, to be frank, cannot be art. There are also difficulties in conflating shape and content, as the Black Mountain School and its descendents in the newer poetries wish to do. Readers can find more in my *Background to Critical Theory*. {11}

But how are these papers so different from, say, *The Theological Structure of the Faerie Queene* or *The Romantic Agony* of yesteryear? Because they don't *illuminate* the text, but simply take sections as departure points for wide-ranging reflections — reflections which display sustained reading, erudition and respectful acknowledgement of other workers in the field, but which bear only tangentially on the text as a literary artefact. Often the commentary entirely overshadows the original poem. On something very slight are built vast structures of significance, as though, once accepted into the canon, quality becomes irrelevant, and the good, bad and indifferent of an author's work are all suitable material for extended study. Perhaps not unrelatedly, many blogs and web sites register a growing discontent within the academic community at the declining standards of research, job opportunities, and standing of the humanities, most particularly in English.

Literary Criticism Proper: The Tower Magazine

But if academia has largely abandoned literary criticism, that ancient and necessary craft is still continued in the small presses. *Tower Magazine* has collected 50 of their reviews in a free pdf document, where the editor {12} allows himself some sobering conclusions.

Honesty isn't wanted, or even acceptable. '*I have,*' Peter McDonald writes, '*a fairly large file of reviewers' emails (more of them from recent years) that apologise for not being able to review this or that book, on the grounds that it*

is a poor one, and that its author, or his or her publisher, would never forgive any reviewer who pointed that out. I, of all people, can hardly say such fears are groundless. The rise in the academic industry (maybe a better term would be the guild) of 'creative writing' has also, I suspect, helped to tighten lips: might not a 'bad' review, after all, be taken as a declaration that some (doubtless expensive) practitioner was not fit for their post, or worth the cost of their courses? Would lawsuits be far behind?'

Reviewing is today indistinguishable from marketing. McDonald again. *Much of what passes for critical discussion of contemporary poetry is (and for some time has been) merely a form of recommendation, one that tends to the hyperbolic. I do not believe that reviewing should be a form of professional networking; but I have to acknowledge that here the facts are against me. In time, all the hyperbole proves corrosive: it should be no surprise that, the higher the volume of praise from reviewers and prize juries, directed in predictable ways to a consistently small circle of predictable names, the less a general reading public feels inclined to tolerate contemporary poetry.*

And that market is small. McDonald: *the audience for a review of contemporary poetry is not only tiny by comparison with that for other kinds of writing, but also made up largely of other poets. . . . And poets — as literary history, not to mention common sense, should tell us — are not signed up to many disinterested conceptions of literary*

culture and critical discussion. They are, on the contrary, interested in often the most heated and intense ways: as vigilant guardians of their own art and its aesthetic (if we want to put it grandly), or as querulous and thin-skinned careerists (if we prefer — and I don't recommend this — a blunter way of putting things).'

The *Tower* reviews are not in fact scathing, but often models of their kind: balanced, engagingly written, providing a decent impression, both of the work under review, and the reviewer's own expectations and preferences. I find the earlier reviews better than the later, but most seem far more charitable than the work really deserves, big names though their authors are.

Particularly of interest are the two reviews of Seamus Heaney's work. The first, of *District and Circle* by Stephen Burt, is somewhat perfunctory and evasive. The second, of *Human Chain* by Maria Johnson is celebratory and, in places, vacuous (*Heaney is 'committed to a sonorous poetics of sound and sense, deeply attuned to the aural design of design of poetry, and so it seems fitting to find him preoccupied here with how the the ephemeral quality of passing sound can be harnessed perpetually and in a poem that deploys the sound pattern of alliteration to create a memorable sound-world of its own . . '*) No so, thinks Kevin Kiely. Heaney writes terrible clunkers. {13} Dr Kiely's book is not scholarship at its best, and doesn't pretend to be. The book is more an extended pamphlet, written in a bad

temper, where the literary criticism is too savage and general to be called close reading. But much of Heaney's poetry does indeed seem, I'd have to agree, to be pedestrian, poorly crafted and too much drawn on that farm he left as a teenager.

But there is a larger point. Heaney has been praised by our leading critics, the most distinguished on both sides of the Atlantic. How has that happened? Because they're incompetent, have sold out to commercial interests, or are happy to see in Seamus Heaney the personable character needed to carry the banner of contemporary poetry? Or just how things work in the real world, that all communities are held together by members who never forget that it is through the community that they individually maintain their status, influence and earning power? Any substance to those views would be most unwelcome, but what is the alternative — that literary world has collectively lost its critical faculties? Or that informed taste, academic pieties aside, was always subordinate to careers, syllabuses and the book trade?

But there is worse. Heaney disqualifies himself as a contemporary poet, Kiely argues, by not appreciating Sylvia Plath sufficiently, and by finding little in William Carlos Williams. But here I must plead sympathy with Heaney. I can't myself find the pure fire that Kiely applauds in Plath's work, and WCW's poems seem pretty negligible, important though their form became, as I have indicated on this site. {11} Writers are notoriously partisan in their affiliations,

without it necessarily limiting their gifts, I'd have thought, but this seems something more. Has modern poetry become so much a religion or act of faith that dissent and proper argument are no longer permissible? And if the leading critics are praising what are clearly faults in Heaney's work (readers can do their own searches), are any views in the literary world to be taken seriously? Is it mere opinion, the blind prating to the blind?

As I've mentioned elsewhere, reviewing has become perfunctory, a packaging for marketing purposes, where the review bears little relation to the poetry itself. Some promotion is to be expected, but can the Bryn Mawr review of *Horace, The Odes. New Translations by Contemporary Poets* really start with 'These are good times for fans of verse translations of Horace's Odes'? {12} I was fairly incredulous {14} and remain so.

For anyone whose time is limited, which is most of us, reviews are essential. We need to plan our reading hours constructively. Postmodernists may well believe that language is inherently deceptive, but before we nod our heads in agreement we should remember that the real world does function with an imperfect language, and does so reasonably well. Ambiguous situations are clarified by examples, and potential misunderstandings are sign-posted and headed off. What sometimes escapes literary theorists is how managements in all walks of life — in commerce, industry, law and scientific research — constantly require

briefs that are well-researched, unambiguous, succinct and compelling. Bankruptcy would follow if they were served by Postmodernist productions. Agreements are likewise scrutinized by lawyers because the most innocuous clause can fatally damage the good intentions of the parties concerned. In short, experience makes nonsense of theory. In its own way, therefore, does not poetry of any description need some purchase on a world valid to its readers if that poetry is to mean something to them? And should not our literary academics understand that a little better?

In Summary

1. The developments I noted twenty years ago in TextEtc.Com are coming to fruition, supplanting the older standards and approaches. Such developments were probably inevitable, academia constantly needing new grist to the mill. In detail, we find:
 - : poetry has increasingly become 'just another text', the starting points for abstruse reflection.
 - : literary study is now more speculative and theoretical, catering for a smaller market and requiring wide reading and considerable mental agility to be understood.
 - : older standards are seen as outworn, restrictive and/or elitist.
 - : serious poetry has become even more intellectualised and campus-bound.
2. Academic studies are only marginally useful to the practising poet — no more, probably, than gallery catalogues are to painters or program notes to musicians.
3. Literary criticism continues, but is more the preserve of

the small presses. Much is written by poets for other poets, doggedly optimistic and narrowly partisan.

4. The general public has largely given up on contemporary poetry.

5. The greatest casualty is seen in poetry translation, where today's translators lack the verse skills to create pleasing or even acceptable renderings.

Nonetheless, criticism is still vital to the health of poetry, enabling poets to understand their craft better and audiences to get more from their reading efforts. It may not be entirely coincidental that standards in contemporary poetry have fallen as the older practices of literary criticism have given way to speculative theory.

In its wilder flights of fancy, that theory is not only doubtful, but unhelpful, preventing the obvious being said. Indeed the very strategies employed to shield Modernists from damaging assessment and comparison — often by championing the importance of novelty, image, and indeterminate language — may be tacitly guiding poetry into yet more fragmented subcultures, at odds with popularity and common sense.

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Inspiration in Modern Poetry: Eight Suggestions

I have noted some difficulties with Modernism, which were largely evident to contemporaries, and which can be accommodated only by accepting that the poet's world (with the surrounding critical apparatus) is the sole arbiter of truth. That accommodation is so commonly made in poetry today that the resulting autism is only apparent from wider perspectives, when art, truth and meaning are seen in the closely-argued generalities of philosophy. As Eliot indicated, poetry is the reorganisation of pre-existing material — attitudes, artworks, tacit beliefs and understandings. The poet assembles and shapes the material to effect a certain response. Or he did once. In Modernism, the poet has to create his own material, and his own response. If, further, the poet cannot employ the beliefs and habits of the common reader, which Modernism, by its stress on the new, has outlawed, then the poet will be cultivating ever less hospitable terrain. The poetry grows thinner, more arbitrary and fragmented.

Other Art Forms

A similar trend is apparent in other art forms, of course: perhaps less so in the modern novel but markedly so in the visual and performing arts. Each has its fiercely loyal partisans, but is generally dependent on specialist reviewing and the public purse. The unpopularity points to real difficulties, real flaws in the product, I am suggesting, and

suggest further that these flaws have to be faced, and alternatives found.

Poetry need not be inspirational, but its great periods in world history do generally coincide with periods of political freedom, material prosperity and abounding faith in the future. So is the poetry of the Greek playwrights, the gold and silver ages of Roman poetry, the poetry of the T'ang Dynasty, the Elizabethan and Romantic schools in England, the gold and silver ages of Russian poetry, and early twentieth-century poetry of Spain. Many of those hopes were misplaced, of course. Wars and political repression followed in Greece, Rome, Russia and Spain. But poets do need the conviction that they are doing something worthwhile, and they are voicing more than personal interests, a situation which is not so apparent today, in poetry's tone or its accomplishments.

Happily, the scene grows much more encouraging if we look a deeper. Since the new vistas can be found in the free Ocaso Press publication *Literary Theory*, generally in more detail and with supporting references, I simply note the relevant section here — as (B 6) etc. — and just source the new material. As the Background stresses, these alternative vistas will only come alive and make sense if readers make their own intellectual journeys. What is ingrained in our current literary sensibility is not easily detected, questioned or enlarged

Ameliorate our World View

The first suggestion is that we ameliorate our pessimistic view of modern life which finds its expression in Baudelaire, and the poètes maudits, draws on Eliot and the horror and despair general after W:W.I., turns darker after W.W.II, and now gloomily stares at environmental degradation {1}, climate change {2}, looming shortages of land and water {3}, corporate takeover of government {4}, rising levels of global debt {5}, debt peonage {6}, surveillance and erosion of civil liberties {7}, and the threat of world war as Russia and China challenge American hegemony {8}.

All are real and pressing, with nuclear annihilation the greatest threat to the planet, yet warfare is not written into our genes but only a legacy of social attitudes. Organized conflicts go back some 6,000 years, well before the creation of literature and modern societies but not 300,000 years to the origin of Homo sapiens. For 98% of his time on earth, mankind has lived happily and cooperatively without the need for wholesale butchery, and of the three animal species known to engage in warfare — ants, some species of chimpanzees and man — man is by far the least aggressive. {9}

Indeed, Matt Ridley's {10} superficial, selective but persuasive defence of free enterprise suggests that the world will go on getting better for everyone. Climate change can be accommodated. Poorer countries have made great strides towards material prosperity in recent decades, and will continue to do so, even in Africa. Much remains to be

done — a truly enormous amount — but there is no cause for the pessimism so prevalent today.

Many of the views are contentious — that labourers left the land willingly to escape rural poverty, that threats to species and the environment are exaggerated, that fossil fuels and nuclear power are still the best if not the only power options, that British cotton goods undercut Indian supplies by fair competition, that economic divides are deepening only in the US, that GM crops are beneficial — but the central message is clear. Successful societies exchange products and ideas, learning from each other and mutually improving themselves if not prevented from doing so by church and state (i.e. excessive regulation, patents, etc.) Need is the mother of invention throughout, and innovation comes more from shop-floor pressures than fundamental scientific research. High debt levels, contracting world trade and financial instability will be overcome by ad hoc adjustments just the same, though asset markets, i.e. banks and currency flows, do need to be regulated. In the last 50 years, more people (practically everywhere but not in North Korea, or presumably in the Middle East) have come to enjoy greater choice, greater material prosperity and freedom to go their own way. The world is not about to run out of water, oil or food. There were food shortages that created the unrest of the Arab Spring, certainly, but a contributory factor was foodstuff farming diverted to create biofuels. Again in the last 50 years, GDP per capita has become lower only in Afghanistan, Haiti, Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone and

Somalia. Life expectancy is lower only in Russia, Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

Child mortality has declined. People live longer, and enjoy better health. Living standards fell only in China (1960s) Cambodia (1970s) Ethiopia (1980s) Rwanda (1990s), Congo (2000s) and North Korea throughout. The rich got richer, but the poor did even better (except in the UK and USA). Even those designated poor in the USA generally have electricity, running water, flush toilets, refrigerator, TV, telephone and even a car and air conditioning (the last two in 70% of cases.) Absolute world poverty may well disappear around 2035. Declining inequality stalled in the UK and USA in the 70s, and increased in China and India, but only because the really rich got even more so. Measured in terms of labour needed to produce the item, everything has got cheaper. Competition creates millionaires but also affordable products. Housing is an exception — because of government policies: restricting supply, tax relief on mortgages and preventing property busts. People richer materially are also happier, on balance, but more important is social and political freedom. Of course there are black spots: war, disease, corruption and the continuing post-2008 recession. Debt levels are high, but increased productivity will see them brought down to manageable proportions. The curse of resource-rich countries is not the resources themselves but rule by rent-seeking autocrats. GM crops bring better productivity.

Large companies are commonly inefficient, self-perpetuating and anti-competitive, but not do generally survive for long. Trust, cooperation and specialization (not self-sufficiency) are the key. Agrarian societies spent much of their income on food (e.g. 35% in modern Malawi), which today takes only 14% of the average consumer's take-home pay. And life for modern hunter-gatherers around the world is not idyllic: two thirds of their time is spent under the threat of tribal warfare. 87% experience war annually. Disease, starvation, murder and enslavement are never far away. Homicide rates in Europe fell from a medieval 35% to 3% in 1750 to under 1% in 1950. World population is increasing, but at declining rates: it will probably stabilize at 9.2 billion in 2075, allowing all to be fed, housed and given worthwhile lives.

Rome's energy source was slaves, supplemented by water-power, animals and simple machines. Windmills became important in Europe, and peat fuelled Holland's success. Britain's industrial revolution was made possible by coal and America. The country got sugar from the East Indies, timber from Canada, cotton from the southern American states, and power equivalent of 15 million acres of forest from her coal. However unpleasant the life in industrial cities, it was far worse in the countryside. Birmingham began as a centre of metalworking trade in the early 1600s, helped by being free of a civic charter and restrictive guilds. Success bred success. A disposable income enabled a consumerist society to begin here in the 18th century, well in advance of France

and other European countries. American land open to settlers prevented the division of holdings between multiple heirs — the problem in Japan, Ireland, Denmark and later in India and China. Planned parenthood is counter-productive and unnecessary. Mothers automatically limit their families when the child mortality rate declines. They turn to education, improve the lives of their families, follow individual inclinations and take a paying job. Over half the world now has a fertility rate below 2.1, which in some countries now places a strain on loan repayments and pensions.

Ridley's views are not Pollyanna hopes. Mankind now has the technologies to purify saline and contaminated water for US 0.2 cent/litre, to generate biofuels from algae, to make alternative energy sources competitive with oil, gas and nuclear energy, to grow food more cheaply in 'vertical farms', to replace meat sources by artificial protein growth, and to bring health care to the poorest by mobile phone technology. {11} All that is missing is the political will to abandon ruinous resource wars, and engage in more equitable and fruitful dialogue.

Understand Science and Contemporary Affairs

I suggest, secondly, that poets become interested in such themes, and so come to terms with science, just as philosophy and organized religion were compelled to do. Two great streams of thought run through the nineteenth century: idealism and materialism. (B 12.5) The first argued that we can understand the ultimate nature of reality only

through and within natural human experience, especially through those traits which distinguish man as a spiritual being. It is thought that provides the categories to experience sensations.

In contrast, the materialists held that there is an independently existing world, that human beings are material entities like everything else, that the human mind does not exist independently of the human body, that there is no God or other non-material being, and that all forms and behaviours are ultimately reducible to general physical laws. Science opposed theology but not religion, and many felt they were freeing faith for a nobler and more adequate conception. Others regarded theology as reflections on knowledge and experience of religion in history, and so undergoing change of necessity. There were many schools of thought, but religion had to renounce its claim to literal truth and content itself with shaping feeling.

But perhaps the most significant development of century was historicism, the belief that something could only be understood, and its significance assessed, by seeing it within the stream of history. Historicism drew strength from notions of an organic unfolding, and from nineteenth century hopes of a science assisting social change.

The themes are still important in current aesthetics and literary theory. Central today are the questions of knowledge, of grounding and of authority. On what do our

judgements ultimately rest? On sense data and logic, say the materialists. On the principles and presuppositions that we acquire through living in society, say the idealists. Structuralism (B 6) and Post-structuralism (B 7-9) crossed the divides. Structuralism sought a conceptual structure as comprehensive as Hegel's, but derived it from anthropology and linguistics, disregarding the assumptions inherent in these disciplines. Post-structuralism is a stance against tradition, authority and measurement. Stressing the individual and spontaneous response, it returns to the early thinkers of the nineteenth century who reacted against the shallow conformism of the Enlightenment. But its view of the world is darker. Wars, genocide and economic exploitation have destroyed any comforting faith in God, in man's inherent goodness, or in the healthy outcome of his passions

Abandon the Obsession with Language and its Deceits

My third suggestion is that poetry give up its obsession with the limitations and deceptions of language, which are not as Modernist poetry supposes. In every profession and walk of life a sensible multi-purpose compromise enables us, every hour of the day, to go about our business in modest security. Nothing in our contemporary world would last a week if the assertions of deconstruction (B 8) were true, and making poetry from misapprehensions only compounds the difficulties. If language is indeed unsatisfactory, even more so will be the poetry that highlights that unsatisfactory nature. Such poetry cannot be revelatory or thought-provoking, moreover, because it is necessarily preaching to the converted, to the shrinking and largely academic world

of Modernist poetry, critical theory and literary criticism.

In practice, as I've tried to show, the difficulties arise because Modernist poets take liberties with language. Their usage is oblique to normal usage, exploits ambiguities of their own making, and continually prefers closing the circle of their own thoughts to making any communal sense. That policy is their privilege, the licence they have given themselves in making their creations, but it is not a feature inherent in language as such, and not therefore a feature of the larger world viewed with and through language as normally used.

Respect a Transcendental Eros

A fourth suggestion is that poets investigate love and the erotic passions in a more thorough-going and transcendental way, perhaps looking at Eros through depth psychology (B 42.4), of which more later. The Greeks had many words for love and they didn't confuse Eros with maternal love or sexual pleasure. Today many aspects of Eros are debased or impoverished, especially in the commercialisation of 'explicit' films and novels, where sex appears squalid, banal and vulgar.

Man has constantly tried to understand the secret and essence of sex in divinity itself. Through sacred prostitution, possession by incubus and succubus, and by secret societies, the gods of sex were manifest on earth. The male appears as logos or principal or form, the female as the life force, each with different attitudes and objectives. And if the

sex drive is not to be repressed, it must be asserted — in profane or sacred love — or transformed by tantric practices, by the Cabbala or Eleusinian mysteries. Eros is not an instinct for reproduction, nor a pursuit of pleasure, but a deep attraction that causes fundamental changes in the partners. Erotic experience transforms the habitual boundaries of the ego, a dis-individualizing exaltation by which one temporarily escapes the human condition.

Worldwide, humanity has indeed recognized many aspects of Eros: The overpowering nature of the sexual experience. Its possession and abandonment. The ever-present danger of loss. The heart as the seat of consciousness. Its roots in love, pain and death. Its pleasure and its suffering. The ecstasy. The incommunicable experience of coitus. Its modesty and associated fear of falling. Its cathartic and cleansing properties, and its part adulthood, initiation ceremonies and social behaviour. All are woefully unrepresented in today's poetry

Importance of a Religious Dimension

Poets also need, it seems to me – a fifth suggestion – to explore the religious dimension (B 42). Poets require a vision of the world, and for long centuries the Christian church provided precisely that, not only in doctrine but in revelation, experience and inspiration. A poet's religious affiliations were not merely reflected in the semantic core of his work, but conditioned the vocabulary, the structure of his arguments and patterning of his Christian outlook. Religion so outlined applies to all religions, to Humanism, scientific

neutrality, indeed to all types of human commitment. Commitment anchors the system of meaning in the emotions, and generates awe. Ritual maximizes order, reinforcing the sense of place or identity in society, especially after the important events of marriage, birth and death. Sacrifice is a form of commitment that clarifies priorities. Morals are what guarantees order in a society. Myths in the broader sense, including religion, are the emotion-laden assertion of a man's place in a meaningful world.

Explore Depth Psychology

Readers who are not adherents of a recognised religion, and/or who wish to sidestep the notoriously partisan nature of religion, may find depth psychology (B 42.3) helpful, a sixth suggestion. Depth psychology is not a new concept, nor an unusual activity: every day we are undertaking analysis and therapy of the soul, this being the psyche of the Greeks or anima of the Romans. The soul does not denote unusual activity: every day we are undertaking analysis and therapy of the soul, this being the psyche of the Greeks or anima of the Romans. The soul indeed is a perspective rather than a substance, a perspective mediating and reflecting on the events we are immersed in all the time. It forms a self-sustaining and imagining substrate to our lives. It deepens events into experiences, making meaning possible, communicating with love and religious concern. It includes dream, image and fantasy in its operation, recognizing that all realities are primarily symbolic and metaphorical.

Depth psychology does not begin with brain physiology (B 23) or with structures of language (B 37) and society (B 26), but with images, these being the basic givens of psychic life: self-originating, inventive, spontaneous and complete, organized in archetypes. It is archetypes, the deepest patterns of our psychic functioning, that are the roots of our souls, governing our perspective of ourselves and the world. Fundamentally, they are metaphors — God, life, health, art — which hold worlds together and which cannot be adequately circumscribed. Other examples can be found in literature, scientific thought, rituals and relationships. Archetypes are emotionally possessive. Organizing whole clusters of events in different areas of life, ascribing the individual his place in society, and controlling everything he sees, does and says, they naturally appear as gods.

By denying the gods we commit many crimes. By seeing ourselves as god, we commit to ideologies and commit atrocities in their name. We look to other people for our salvation, and are continually disappointed. Psychologising cannot be brought to rest in science or philosophy. It is satisfied only by its own movement of seeing through, during which it a) interiorises, moving from data to personification, b) justifies itself, even hinting at a deeper hidden god, c) provides a narrative, told in metaphors, d) uses ideas as eyes of the soul. Literalism or monotheism of meaning is the greatest enemy today, and we should remember that definitions outside science, mathematics and

logic are elusive things. Enigma provokes understanding. Myths make concrete particulars into universals. Vico remarked that metaphors (B 24) 'give sense and passion to insensate things'. Archetypes are semantically metaphors and have a double existence, being a) full of internal opposites, b) unknowable and yet known through images, c) congenital but not inherited, d) instinctive and spiritual, e) purely formal structures and contents, f) psychic and extra-psychic.

The gods are essential to our well-being, therefore, giving us faith and significance in our surroundings, but are rooted in society's understandings and tacit beliefs. They are not individual to the poet, therefore, who has to search for them through a shared response to what he writes, i.e. not simply tack them on à la Pound's Cantos.

Consider Metaphor Research

Metaphor research (B 24) is a seventh suggestion. Human beings create cognitive models that reflect concepts needed for interaction between themselves and their surroundings. Such concepts are made by bodily activities prior to language. The cognitive models proposed were very varied, with the most complex being radial with multiple schema linked to a common centre. Language was characterized by symbolic models (with generative grammar an overlying, subsequent addition) and operated by constructing models — propositional, image schematic, metaphoric and metonymic. Properties were matters of relationships and prototypes. Meaning arose through embodiment in schemas.

Schemas could also be regarded as containers — part-whole, link, centre-periphery, source-path-goal, up-down, front-back. Objectivity was never absolute, and we could only look at a problem from as many aspects as possible.

Though schemas were hypothetical, and lacked the analytical power of other approaches, Lakoff and Turner have enlarged their potential. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* attempted to re-found philosophy on cognitive science. It employed three premises: that mind is inherently embodied, that thought is mostly unconscious, and that abstract concepts are largely metaphorical. Out went Platonic Idealism, Cartesian Dualism, and much of the Anglo-American analytical philosophy. As ever, the concepts were intriguing, indeed liberating, but the empirical evidence was not compelling, and the arguments advanced did not fully engage with those of different intellectual tribes (mathematicians, philosophers, scientists in general). Mark Johnson had independently extended the notion of metaphor to parables — not a word standing for something else, but a whole story standing for a particular description of the world. Narrative imaginings allow us to understand and organize experience. We project one story onto another, language emerging to allow this process. Again, a useful top-down alternative to the bottom-up (and not over-successful) approach of traditional linguistics, but still only straws in the wind. Then came *Where Mathematics Comes From: How the Embodied Mind Brings Mathematics into*

Being by Lakoff and Núñez, that did build rigorously on two decades of cognitive science.

Images are important to metaphor research and to Modernist poetry, but those images have important and complicated tasks to do, and so are not wholly under the poet's control. Race memories, important distinctions, types of argument, rhetoric and tacit beliefs — all have to play their part to make a poem's imagery significant and persuasive.

Vista of the Irreducible Mind

For those interested in the mind, but find scientific models based on the physiology of the brain, (B 23.1) and computer models (B 23.5) too mechanical, I recommend — an eighth suggestion — they explore the Theory of the Irreducible Mind (B 23.10) This approach by Edward F. Kelly and co-workers is built on the psychology of William James and the research of F.W.H. Meyers into the paranormal. On this evidence, the mind is not generated by brain activity, but is merely part of an exterior, pre-existing and all-pervading consciousness, a consciousness that is selected and shaped by the brain into an individual awareness — much as the radio set selects and makes audible some frequency in a broad spectrum of radio waves. Consciousness is therefore incorporeal, larger than individual brains, and may to some extent survive physical death.

But how can mind and matter interact, non-physical with physical matter? Because mind and matter are connected on

the quantum mechanics level, believes Henry Stapp, (B 23.10) essentially by ion channels, so narrow that quantum mechanics effects must operate at nerve terminals in the brain. Stapp's views have naturally been contested, but are based on a thorough understanding of quantum mechanics and Whitehead's Process and Reality. Indeed the emergence of complexity, consciousness and networks has greatly changed our view of the universe, and given back to human beings some control over their thoughts and actions, as common sense has always supposed, but behaviourism and recent literary theory have denied.

In short, poetry is language used in its larger dimension, and that dimension assumes the world itself has larger dimensions than the materialism of our late capitalist age. In profound ways, poetry is an exploration of our lives and their meanings to us.

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