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MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM: APPROACHING THE PRESENT IN AMERICAN POETRY

by David Antin

A few years ago Roy Lichtenstein completed a group of works called the "Modern Art" series. The paintings -- there were sculptures too, aptly labeled "Modern Sculpture" -- were mainly representations of Art Deco settings, groups of recognizable abstract forms derived primarily from circles and triangles, situated in a shallow virtual space, derived from a late and academic Cubism, and treated to Lichtenstein's typical, simulated Ben-Day dot manner in uninflected shades of blue, red, yellow, black and white, and sometimes green. The paintings were amusing. It was absurd to see the high art styles of the early twenties and the "advanced" decorative and architectural styles of the later twenties and early thirties through the screen of a comic strip. It was also appropriate, since these design elements found their way into the backgrounds of Buck Rogers and the lobby of the Radio City Music Hall. At the same time there was something pathetic and slightly unnerving in this treatment of the style features that had long appeared as the claims to "modernism" of Futurism, Purism, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus. What is particularly unnerving about the series is what is most relevant to the subject of modernism versus postmodernism.

Clearly the sense that such a thing as a "postmodern" sensibility exists and should be defined is wrapped up with the conviction that what we have called "modern" for so long is thoroughly over. If we are capable of imagining the "modern" as a closed set of stylistic features, "modern" can no longer mean present. For it is precisely the distinctive feature of

the present that, in spite of any strong sense of its coherence, it is always open on its forward side. Once "modern" presents itself as closed, it becomes Modern and takes its place alongside Victorian or Baroque as a period style. Perhaps it was this sense that led furniture salesmen back in the fifties to offer us a distinction between Modern and Contemporary furniture, in which Modern referred to a specific group of degraded Futurist and Bauhaus characteristics, signified by particular materials like glass and stainless steel or chromium, or by particular design features, such as the "laboratory look" or "streamlining," whereas Contemporary signified merely the absence of any strongly defined period features. The pathos of Modern Art is particular to itself. There is after all nothing pathetic about Baroque or Victorian Art. But it was the specific claim of "modernism" to be finally and forever open. That was its "futurism," and now that its future has receded into the past it can be had as a sealed package whose contents have the exotic look of something released from a time capsule. This is true for Schoenberg and Varèse, Ruth St. Denis and Isadora or Martha Graham, for Picasso, Malevitch and Moholy Nagy, and for Eliot and Pound. There is nothing surprising about this. The impulses that provided the energy for Modern Art came from artists who had arrived at their maturity, as human beings if not as artists, by the beginning of the first World War. Since then the world has changed not once but twice. To read the letters or diaries of these artists is to realize that it would take almost as much effort to understand them as to understand the letters of Poussin. But while this is so evident to really contemporary artists as to be almost platitudinous, it is not so evident to anyone else, mainly because the truly contemporary artists of our time are known primarily to a community consisting of themselves. In a sense it is this capacity of the contemporary artist to recognize his contemporaries that is the essential feature of his contemporaneity. For two reasons, I would like to discuss the nature of this contemporaneity in particular for American poetry: because the course of American poetry from 1914 to 1972 is characteristic of the changes in our culture and attitudes, and because our poetry is in an extraordinarily healthy state at the moment and there is no need to consider what is being produced today as in any way inferior to the works of the supposed masters of Modernism.

The most artificial and consequently the most convincing way to do this would be to compose a short continuous history of American poetry beginning at the turn of the century and showing how poetry and sensibility continued to change from salient moment to salient moment till we run out of salient moments. I will not do this because, whatever the ontological facts of change through time may be, it is a fact of our experience that it is the past not the present which changes. We go on for a long time

taking the present for a constant, much as the self. At some point we raise our heads and are surprised at what lies behind us and how far away it is. The first questions I would like to raise then are when and to whom did the career of "modern" American poetry appear to be over and what did this mean? Taken precisely these questions are very difficult to answer because, among other things, they raise the preliminary question of what "modern" American poetry was, and fluctuations in the answer to this question will produce fluctuations in the answers to the other questions. But in a casual sort of way it is possible to ask these questions in terms of the average, college educated, literate American as of, say, 1960. (1960 is a turning point because it is the date of publication of Donald Allen's anthology The New American Poetry, which presented the same college student moyen with evidence for an alternate view of the history of American modernism.)

Allen Tate provides a standard list of "masters" in a 1955 essay that was reprinted as an introduction in his part of An Anthology of British and American Poetry, 1900-1950, which he compiled with David Cecil. It includes Frost, Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Marianne Moore, Ransom, Cummings and Crane, and is more or less typical for the period during which it was given and for the kind of critic making it. A few years later (1962) Randall Jarrell gives pretty much the same list in his essay "Fifty Years of American Poetry," but he includes William Carlos Williams and omits Crane and Cummings from the "masters" class. It is also worth noting that for this group of critics the period of "modernism," in Tate's words, has "Frost and Stevens at the beginning, Hart Crane in the middle, and Robert Lowell at the end . . .," which situates the period of "modernism" roughly between 1910 and 1950, with Frost at the end of one period and Lowell at the end of the newer one. The fact that it is now 1972 and that the list seems open to reconsideration, to say the least, should not obscure the degree of agreement in established academic circles at that time on this history of the "modern American tradition." From Pound and Eliot to Robert Lowell. This was the view held by the Kenyon Review, Partisan Review, Sewanee Review, Hudson Review, Poetry Magazine and perhaps even the Saturday Review of Literature. If these authorities were concerned with Modern Poetry in English, they would generally include Yeats and Auden and Dylan Thomas, though the precise relations of the English to the Americans in the "modern" tradition were not worked out in great detail, except that it was clear that Yeats was among the beginners (after Pound), Auden in the middle (after Eliot), and Thomas toward the end (much like Lowell).

Almost all of the critics who wrote in these magazines held important university positions and taught this view of the tradition as an uncon-

troversial body of facts. The conviction that in 1950 we were at the conclusion of this period was as much a matter of agreement as everything else, though the feeling surrounding this conviction was somewhat equivocal. In a 1958 lecture on "The Present State of Poetry" Delmore Schwartz offered this summary of the situation:

. . . the poetic revolution, the revolution in poetic taste which was inspired by the criticism of T.S. Eliot . . . , has established itself in power so completely that it is taken for granted not only in poetry and the criticism of poetry, but in the teaching of literature.

Once a literary and poetic revolution has established itself, it is no longer revolutionary, but something very different from what it was when it had to struggle for recognition and assert itself against the opposition of established literary authority. Thus the most striking trait of the poetry of the rising generation of poets is the assumption as self-evident and incontestable of that conception of the nature of poetry which was, at its inception and for years after, a radical and much disputed transformation of poetic taste and sensibility. What was once a battlefield has become a peaceful public park on a pleasant Sunday afternoon, so that if the majority of new poets write in a style and idiom which takes as its starting point the poetic idiom and literary taste of the generation of Pound and Eliot, the motives and attitudes at the heart of the writing possess an assurance which sometimes makes their work seem tame and sedate.

Or to quote Auden, "Our intellectual marines have captured all the little magazines." Whatever one thinks of Schwartz's equivocal characterization of the poets he is describing as the somewhat "sedate" heirs of Eliot and Pound, it is now baffling to hear him refer to new poets writing in a "style which takes as its starting point the poetic idiom and literary taste of the generation of Pound and Eliot" and find him quoting as a specimen of this style:

The green catalpa tree has turned
All white; the cherry blooms once more.
In one whole year I haven't learned
A blessed thing they pay you for.

The comparison between this updated version of A Shropshire Lad, whatever virtues one attributes to it, and the poetry of The Cantos or The Waste Land seems so aberrant as to verge on the pathological. At first sight it is nearly impossible to conceive what Schwartz could possibly have imagined the "poetic idiom" of Pound and Eliot to be, if it could have bred such children as Snodgrass. But the problem is not that Schwartz did not understand what Pound or Eliot sounded like or how their poems operated. His essays demonstrate his grasp of the individual characteristics of both these poets. The etiology lies deeper than that. It lies in his genealogical view of what implications are to be drawn from the work of these "masters," and how these implications validate a succession of poetic practices which inevitably move further and further from the originating styles to the point at which the initiating impulses have lost all their energy. In Schwartz's view Snodgrass and the rest of the poets of the Pack, Hall and Simpson anthology are merely "the end of the line." The important question then becomes: how did the line arrive at this place? The easiest way to answer this question is not to explore the various aspects of the nearly stillborn descendants, but to find the next to the last place -- the last "living" generation within the tradition. This group would include Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke, Karl Shapiro and Delmore Schwartz himself. If we can understand the curve of connection that joins these poets to Eliot and Pound we can understand what this tradition of "modernism" was thought to be.

Though he is neither the weakest nor the strongest of these poets Schwartz is in some ways the most characteristic of this "generation." Schwartz's first book of poetry, In Dreams Begin Responsibilities, was published in 1939. It was greeted with enormous enthusiasm. Allen Tate described Schwartz's style as "the only genuine innovation since Pound and Eliot came upon the scene twenty-five years ago." The description is strange, especially in view of Schwartz's own more modest description of the poems as "poems of Experiment and Imitation." The imitations were obvious. "In the Naked Bed in Plato's Cave" is an exercise in what formalist critics like to call Eliot's "late Tudor blank verse."

. . . Hearing the milkman's chop,
His striving up the stair, the bottle's chink,
I rose from bed, lit a cigarette,
And walked to the window. The stony street
Displayed the stillness in which buildings stand,
The street-lamp's vigil and the horse's patience.

But somehow the poem, like most of Schwartz's poems, manages to jog

along in the sound of Auden from whom he had acquired the gift of versified platitude, which is so well exemplified in

Tiger Christ unsheathed his sword,
Threw it down, became a lamb.
Swift spat upon the species, but
took two women to his heart.

which concludes in true cautionary style:

"-What do all examples show?
What can any actor know?
The contradiction in every act,
The infinite task of the human heart."

Not only does the sound belong to Auden, but the wisdom, often complete with capitalized nouns:

May memory restore again and again
The smallest color of the smallest day:
Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn.

Since the title of Schwartz's first book is derived from the epigraph to Yeats's 1914 volume Responsibilities one might have expected some Yeats, and it's there:

All clowns are masked and all personae
Flow from choices;. . .

Gifts and choices! All men are masked,
And we are clowns who think to choose our faces
And we are taught in time of circumstances
And we have colds, blond hair and mathematics,
For we have gifts which interrupt our choices;. . .

It is a selection from the imagery of Yeats screened through Auden's bouncing sound. In fact, both the Eliot and Yeats in Schwartz's early work are strained through a screen of Auden. Since Schwartz was twenty-five when the first book came out, the only surprising thing about this is Tate's enthusiasm. For if, as Tate had argued, poetry is "a form of human knowledge," Schwartz's first book neither adds anything to it nor even takes anything away. As for Schwartz, the early work is smooth and trivial but

the later work cannot even be said to attain this level. If Auden stood between Schwartz and the "modernist" masters, this fact was not peculiar to Schwartz for the blight of Auden lay heavy on the land. Shapiro's "Elegy for a Dead Soldier" begins matter of factly enough in spite of the rhymes:

A white sheet on the tail-gate of a truck
Becomes an altar; two small candlesticks
Sputter at each side of the crucifix

but soon swings into Auden's lush rhetorical style:

No history deceived him, for he knew
Little of times and armies not his own;
He never felt that peace was but a loan,
Had never questioned the idea of gain.
Beyond the headlines once or twice he saw
The gathering of power by the few
But could not tell their names; he cast his vote,
Distrusting all the elected but not the law.
He laughed at socialism; on mourrait
Pour les industriels? He shed his coat
And not for brotherhood, but for his pay.
To him the red flag marked a sewer main.

Even Randall Jarrell, who in 1942 was struggling with a swarm of other voices, had contracted the Auden disease.

But love comes with its wet caress
To its own nightmare of delight,
And love and nothingness possess
The speechless cities of the night.

At the same time that these younger poets were inundated by Auden they were very busy attempting to exorcise him from their minds. Schwartz sets the style for this procedure by dividing Auden into "The Two Audens." One is "the clever guy, the Noel Coward of literary Marxism," one who speaks in the voice of the "popular entertainer, propagandist, and satirist." This is the Auden "of the Ego," an unauthentic Auden. The other is the "voice of the Id," who is "a kind of sibyl who utters the tell-tale symbols in a psychoanalytic trance," that is, an authentic Auden. The first Auden writes lines like "You were a great Cunarder, I / Was only a fishing smack"; the second writes passages like:

Certain it became while we were still incomplete
There were certain prizes for which we would never compete;
A choice was killed by every childish illness,
The boiling tears among the hothouse plants,
The rigid promise fractured in the garden,
And the long aunts.

If the distinction appears oversubtle to us now it did not appear so to Randall Jarrell, who two years later in a somewhat schoolboyish essay tried to work out the precise stylistic differences that encoded the distinction between the more and less authentic Audens. For Jarrell this comes down to the distinction between an early Auden and a late Auden. Early Auden (the authentic one) employs a peculiar language; late Auden employs a peculiar rhetoric. Though Jarrell seemed at the time fairly satisfied with this tautology, he was apparently unable to provide any reasonable distinction between a "language" and a "rhetoric," because he characterized both of them with the same sort of lists of stylistic literary devices, some of which he merely seems to like better than others. Four years later he returned to the Auden problem, this time approaching it from the point of view of changes in "Auden's Ideology." He finds not two but three Audens -- Revolutionary Auden, Liberal Auden, and Fatalist-Christian Auden. It is hard to understand why versified Kierkegaard should appear fundamentally different from versified Marx. No matter what Auden says it's still chatter. The difference between the Auden of 1930 and 1940 is merely that people are saying a few different things at the same cocktail party. The only "position" one can attribute to Auden is a mild *contraposto*, one hand in his pocket, the other holding the martini. Which is what is modern about his work. It is modern because he has a modern role to play. The scene is always some kind of party, "Auden" is the main character, and the name of the play is "The Ridiculous Man." Original Sin, The Oedipus Complex, the Decline of the West, the Class Struggle, the Origin of the Species are the lyrics of a musical. There are no changes of opinion, because there are no opinions, just lyrics; there are no changes in style -- even at a cocktail party a man may place one finger in the air as he moves to a high point. The Icelandic meters, Piers Plowman, the Border Ballads, syllabics are all made to jog along with a very modish sound. If there is something lethal in this outcome, it is not a viewpoint. Auden has occupied this position with his life.

But Schwartz and Jarrell did not regard Auden as a "modernist" master merely because he was a splendid example of a modern predicament. There are two verbal habits or strategies which Auden has always employed and which these poets regard as fundamental categories of the

"modern" mind, appeals to "history" and to "psychoanalysis." Talking about Eliot in a 1955 essay Schwartz refers to a "sense of existence which no human being, and certainly no poet, can escape, at this moment in history, or at any moment in the future which is likely soon to succeed the present." According to Schwartz two aspects of this "view of existence which is natural to a modern human being" are "the development of the historical sense and the awareness of experience which originate in psychoanalysis." Though the "awareness of experience" originating in psychoanalysis may seem somewhat *fin de siècle* or Wagnerian to us now, what Schwartz means by this is fairly clear. What he means by the "historical sense" is not so clear. One would normally suppose a "historical sense" to consist of some view of the relations between sequentially related epochs. Marxism supplies a kind of eschatological view of history and Auden frequently refers to this, along with several other views which are by no means consistent with it. Still, if you look for it, you can find several antihistorical senses, in Auden's poetry. But a "historical sense" is the one thing you cannot find in poems like The Waste Land or The Cantos, which we may assume Schwartz would have considered the principal "modern" works. The Waste Land and The Cantos are based on the principle of collage, the dramatic juxtaposition of disparate materials without commitment to explicit syntactical relations between elements. A "historical sense" and "psychoanalysis" are structurally equivalent to the degree that they are in direct conflict with the collage principle. They are both strategies for combatting the apparently chaotic collage landscapes of human experience and turning them into linear narratives with a clearly articulated plot. It is not easy to see what advantage such systems offer a poet unless he was convinced of their truth, which would, I suppose, mean either that it would be relevant to some purpose to use these systems as conceptual armatures upon which to mount the diverse and colorful individual facts of sociopolitical and personal human experience, or else that these systems conformed more perfectly than any other with a vaster system of representations to which the poet was committed for some valued reasons. If this was what Schwartz intended we would be confronted with a truly "classical" poetry which would devote itself to the particularization of general truths. While we might imagine such a poetry, we have never really been confronted with it. The poets of Schwartz's generation never presented anything like the kind of detailed particularity of human or political experience in their poems that would have been a necessary condition for such a poetry of metonymy. Even if the poems had fulfilled this necessary condition, such a poetry would require either a commonly accepted theory of history or psychoanalysis or at least a precise knowledge of the details of such a theory and the additional knowledge that such a theory

was being referred to, as well as a set of rules for referring the concrete particulars of experience to particular aspects of the theory. Such a situation only obtains for a few people in narrowly circumscribed areas of what we generally call science; that is to say, it obtains only for those who share what Thomas Kuhn in his book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions calls a paradigm. Even in a rather trivially reduced form of this situation such as The Waste Land, where Eliot has himself advised us that the poem is built on the plan of a particular mythical narrative, there is no agreement on the way the particular parts of the poem relate to the myth. There is so little agreement on this that most critics who are involved with such concerns cannot decide whether the poem does or doesn't include the regeneration which is intrinsic to the myth.

For better or worse "modern" poetry in English has been committed to a principle of collage from the outset, and when "history" or "psychoanalysis" are invoked they are merely well labeled boxes from which a poet may select ready-made contrasts. For relatively timid poets this strategy may have the advantage of offering recognizability of genre as an alibi for the presentation of what he regards as radically disparate materials, somewhat in the manner in which a sculptor like Stankiewicz used to throw together a boiler casing, several pistons and a few odd gears and then arrange them in the shape of a rather whimsical anthropomorphic figure. In the main, poets have not resorted to "a sense of history" or to "psychoanalysis" because of the success of these viewpoints in reducing human experience to a logical order, but because the domains upon which they are normally exercised are filled with arbitrary and colorful bits of human experience, which are nevertheless sufficiently "framed" to yield a relatively tame sort of disorder.

If there is any doubt that it is the "sense of collage" that is the basic characteristic of "modernist" poetry, it is mainly because of the reduced form in which the principle of collage had been understood by the Nashville critics and the poets who followed them. Poets of this group, like Jarrell or Robert Lowell, tend to produce this attenuated collage with the use of a great variety of framing devices. In a poem only sixteen lines long Jarrell ticks off the names of Idomeneo, Stendhal, the Empress Eugenie, Maxwell's demon, John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, William Wordsworth, Charles Dodgson and Darwin's son, a fair-sized list of figures from the arbitrary procession of history, but the poem is carefully rationalized (framed) by its title, "Charles Dodgson's Song." The author of Alice in Wonderland ought to be able to sing history in any order, and the poem is presented as a supposed "inversion" of a supposed "logical" view of history. But there is no "logical" target of the poem, which is not a parody at all. It is merely a pleasant historical collage with a title that takes the

edge off. To poets like Jarrell, Europe after the end of the second World War offered an unparalleled opportunity. It presented them with a ready-made rubble heap (a collage) that could be rationalized by reference to a well-known set of historical circumstances, and it is no accident that nearly half of his book The Seven League Crutches (published in 1951) is devoted to a section called "Europe." The strongest of the poems in this section, "A Game at Salzburg," is also typical:

A little ragged girl, our ball-boy;
A partner -- ex-Africa Korps --
In khaki shorts, P.W. illegible.
(He said: "To have been a prisoner of war
In Colorado iss a privilege.")
The evergreens, concessions, carrousel,
And D.P. camp of Franz Joseph Park;
A gray-green river, evergreen-dark hills.
Last, a long way off in the sky,
Snow-mountains.

Over this clouds come, a darkness falls.
Rain falls.

On the veranda Romana,
A girl of three,
Sits licking sherbet from a wooden spoon;
I am already through.
She says to me, softly: Hier bin i'.
I answer: Da bist du.

This is a kind of covert collage, the girl ball-boy, the ex-enemy tennis partner, the P.W. camp in Colorado, the evergreens, concessions, carrousel, the girl on the veranda eating sherbet, the dialogue "Here I am," "There you are." And while it masquerades in the guise of a realist narrative, there is no "narrative" -- or to be even more precise, what it shares with "short stories" of this type is the characteristic of a covert collage masquerading behind the thin disguise of pseudo-narrative. The poem would have been a lot more effective had it ended here, but Jarrell, who is obsessed with the necessity for framing at the same time that he is always tempted by his vision of the arbitrary, goes on for two more stanzas past some more local color -- Marie Theresa's sleigh and some ruined cornice nymphs -- to the obligatory pseudo-epiphany in which such pseudo-narratives normally culminate:

But the sun comes out, and the sky
Is for an instant the first rain-washed blue
Of becoming

In anguish, in expectant acceptance
The world whispers: Hier bin i'.

Jarrell may have a strong sense of the arbitrariness of experience, but the experience is not so arbitrary that it cannot be labeled in terms of "local color" as well as the "revelational experience." Still, "A Game at Salzburg is the strongest poem in the book and is a marked improvement over Little Friend, Little Friend, in which the only poem that isn't smothered in framing devices is the epigraph to the volume:

. . . Then I hear the bomber call me in: "Little Friend
Little Friend, I got two engines on fire. Can you see
me Little Friend?"
I said, "I'm crossing right over you. Let's go home."

The only reason that Jarrell didn't frame this piece was that he didn't think of it as a poem.

The use of covert collage was very widespread among the poets of the forties and early fifties. Robert Lowell's Lord Weary's Castle abounds in it and employs a great variety of framing devices: collage as biography ("Mary Winslow," "In Memory of Arthur Winslow"), as elegy ("The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket"), as psychological fiction ("Between the Porch and the Altar"), as history ("Concord," "Napoleon Crosses the Beresina"); and there is a considerable overlap of genres in single poems. A sonnet like "Concord" is a fairly good example of this type of history collage:

Ten thousand Fords are idle here in search
Of a tradition. Over these dry sticks --
The Minute Man, the Irish Catholics,
The ruined bridge and Walden's fished-out perch --
The belfry of the Unitarian Church
Rings out the hanging Jesus. Crucifix,
How can your whited spindling arms transfix
Mammon's unbridled industry, the lurch
For forms to harness Heraclitus' stream!
This Church is Concord -- Concord where Thoreau
Named all the birds without a gun to probe

Through darkness to the painted man and bow:
The death-dance of King Philip and his scream
Whose echo girdled this imperfect globe.

If it is obvious that Lowell has attitudes toward American history, it is even more obvious that they do not represent an "historical sense." The poem is a collage made up of remnants of the past thrust into the present in the form of worn-out monuments. Thoreau, the Minute Man, the Unitarian Church share a salient characteristic for Lowell's imagined tourists in their Fords; they are all out of the elementary school history text. King Philip would also share this characteristic, but he doesn't make it into most grade school histories. Lowell throws him into the list of contrasting figures on the battlefield of history to add the one that inhabits his mind along with the rest of them. The poem is filled with sets of clear and not so clear dramatic oppositions. Thoreau, the peaceful resister, against the Minute Man, the warlike resister; King Philip, the Indian rebel, who shares a feature with Thoreau (perhaps) in resisting the inevitable advance of technology (if we discount Thoreau's pencil factory), and shares warlikeness with the Minute Man; the Irish Catholics who inherit the energy of Christianity (we all know about Irishmen), which contrasts with the pallid lack of energy of the "higher class" Unitarians. The Irish probably drive the Fords; the Unitarians were there forever, at least since King Philip's War was settled. The figures in the poem carry a barrage of coupled features -- High Energy/ High Value; High Energy/Low Value; Low Energy/Low Value; Low Energy/High Value -- though in a number of cases the feature assignments are not by any means clear from the poem, only from a general likelihood, considering the places from which Lowell acquired the material. Thus, Melville's "Metaphysics of Indian Hating" lies somewhere behind the poem, as does Hawthorne; but it is not clear how far behind the poem they lie. That is to say, it is clear from the poem that the arbitrary selection of figures who appear in it, including Christ, have strong evaluative interpretations attached to them, but it is not at all clear what they are or how securely they are attached. So that the attitudes toward history in the poem merely guarantee various charges of intensity. The poem, however, is securely situated in a genre that is more appropriately called "The New England Myth." This is not so much history as a communal fiction carried out by Hawthorne, Melville, Henry James, a host of minor writers, and, at the very beginning of his career, by T.S. Eliot, where we might have expected it to end for sheer lack of relevance to any contemporary reality. But it is from this reservoir of attitudes that Lowell persists in pulling his pieces.

"Concord" is not a major effort for Lowell and whatever strength

it has it draws from its position among the other pieces in Lord Weary's Castle, but it is characteristic of Lowell's manipulation of history, which turns out to be neither history nor Lowell's manipulation of it. It is the "New England Myth" reduced still further to the cryptic commonplaces of the sort of Partisan Review essay that used to draw upon the well-known ironic collisions of Hawthorne, Melville and James with grade school textbooks and Fourth of July speeches. It is cocktail-party intellectual history. It requires no theory and very few facts, and is a natural collage. In defense of Lowell, the poet, one may say that it has the singular advantage of appealing to a coherent group that is not interested in history or fact or poetry, but in its own conversation -- the literary community of the New York Review of Books. So it is not surprising to find Lowell still exploiting the same strategy at the end of the 1950's in "For the Union Dead." This poem is on a larger scale, and because it is somewhat expanded it superimposes a screen of pseudo-narrative over its pseudo-history. Or more correctly the "history" is partially dissolved in a standing liquid of pseudo-narrative. Where "Concord" begins with the anecdotal realism of the Fords stalled on the highway, "For the Union Dead" begins with a walk through South Boston:

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.

This triggers the memory of watching the fish as a child, and emergence from this memory leads to the memory of a different walk across Boston Common. Here the Heraclitian flux of "Concord" is expanded to:

. . . One morning last March,
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized
fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

There are several worn-out monuments of New England virtue (mythical virtue) here also: Colonel Shaw, who

. . . has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
a greyhound's gentle tautness;
he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy.

. . . he rejoices in man's lovely,
peculiar power to choose life and die --
when he leads his black soldiers to death,
he cannot bend his back.

-- and the usual "old white churches" which "hold their air / of sparse, sincere rebellion . . .," to which pair is added William James, who "could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe." Lowell, who always manages to get as much grade-school history into a poem as he can, manages to turn the protective red lead paint on the brand new girders into "Puritan-pumpkin colored girders." Only Squanto and the turkeys are missing, but this is probably for the very good reason that they do not immediately lend themselves to the "dark view" of New England history appropriated from Hawthorne et al by the Southerners of the Partisan Review. If the churches are "sincere," they are also "sparse" -- that is, Puritanical, rigid, probably even anti-sexual. The bronze statue of Colonel Shaw "cannot bend his back," which looks at the least like some sort of "abstract" arrogance. ("The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier / grow slimmer and younger each year --.") For the inhabitants of Boston "Their monument sticks like a fishbone / in the city's throat." William James, whose wholesome virtue seems to have blinded him to St. Gaudens' aesthetic limitations, apparently did not anticipate this. Although the poem at times seems so, it is not a form of cryptic Southern propaganda. The ironies are merely obligatory parts of the poem's machinery; grammar school history is only a target for parlor conversation. William James knew about Northern negro lynchings and the famous draft riots and it is doubtful that Lowell would deny this. The "William James" of the poem is not William James, it is a "Great Optimist" speaking, also an invention of literary gossip. The real concern of this poem is what its "urban collage" -- "la forme

d'une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel."

"For the Union Dead" is so much like Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" that it is instructive to examine the similarities and differences between these two poems separated by a hundred years time. The Baudelaire poem is also triggered by a walk past something that is no longer there: ". . . as I was crossing the new Carrousel." The Place du Carrousel, or that part of it situated between the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel and the Louvre, had been occupied until about 1840 by a snarl of narrow streets that Louis Philippe started to clear in a vast demolition program that was completed by Napoleon III. The renovations were not completed much before the composition of the poem. So that for Baudelaire the area, for most of the length of his experience of Paris, had been the site of temporary structures and things rising and falling, a situation not unlike the post-second World War renovation of the older Eastern American cities like New York or Boston. It is hardly necessary to point out that the area around the Tuileries and the Boston Common have certain similarities for their respective cities. Baudelaire does not begin directly with a description of the city but with an apostrophe to Andromache, an image of loss which, it turns out, takes its point of departure from the presence of the Seine on the poet's right as he faces the Louvre; but with the second stanza he moves directly into the "city collage":

. . . That little river

.....

Fecundated my fertile memory,
As I was crossing
The old Paris is no more (the form of a city
Changes faster, alas, than the human heart);

Only in my mind can I see that camp of shacks,
Those piles of roughed-out capitals and columns,
The weeds, the great blocks grown green from the water
in the puddles
And the confused pile of rubble gleaming among the tiles.

Where Lowell has an Aquarium, Baudelaire has a menagerie that is no longer there. For Lowell:

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

My hand draws back. I often sigh still
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
of the fish and reptile

And for Baudelaire:

There, one morning, I saw . . .

A swan that had escaped its cage
And with its webbed feet scraping on the dry pavement
Dragged its white plumage on the rough earth
Along a dried up gutter . . .

In whose dust it nervously bathed its wings.

These are both poems of intense nostalgia, where the city becomes the site of arbitrary historical change. The city as collage is a sort of model of the menace of history viewed as deterioration from some "non-fragmented" anterior state. The similarities in the poems are more surprising than the differences, which are to a great extent differences in presentational strategy. Baudelaire has no reason to suppose that he should not explicitly comment on the "meaning" of the presented material:

Paris changes! But in my melancholy nothing
Budges! New palaces, scaffoldings, blocks of stone,
Old quarters, the whole thing becomes an allegory for me
And my fond memories are heavier than the stones.

The result of this is that he winds up as figure inside the poem. Lowell plays it cooler. Though it is the poet who crouches at his television set, it is Colonel Shaw who "is riding on his bubble" waiting "for the blessed break." Which may seem like a thin distinction, but it corresponds rather closely to Allen Tate's distinction between a Romantic and a Modern poet.

. . . the Romantic movement taught the reader to look for inherently poetical objects, and to respond to them "emotionally" in certain prescribed ways, these ways being indicated by the "truths" interjected at intervals among the poetical objects. Certain modern poets offer no inherently poetical objects, and they fail to instruct the reader in the ways he must feel about the objects. All experience, then, becomes potentially the material of

poetry -- not merely the pretty and the agreeable -- and the modern poet makes it possible for us to "respond" to this material in all the ways in which men everywhere may feel and think . . . for to him [the modern poet] poetry is not a special package tied up in pink ribbon: it is one of the ways that we have of knowing the world.

With careful qualifications Tate is here defining his idea of the "modern" poet. His argument rests on two ideas: that all experience is a legitimate arena for poetry and that the interjection of the poet's opinions into a poem is an act of coercion that narrows the possibilities of response in the reader by constraining him to take up certain attitudes in regard to the objects presented. If you follow this line of reasoning, Baudelaire shares the "modernist" appetite for dealing with "all experience . . . not merely the pretty and the agreeable," but he is not a "modern" poet insofar as he instructs the readers not once but several times in the ways they must respond to the objects he has presented. By this formula, subtract from Baudelaire his remaining "Romanticism" and we get Lowell's "modernism." Since Tate was arguing for a poetry of pure presentation, in which the reader's response to the "objects" in the poem is based entirely upon a kind of object semantics, he would seem to be for a poetry of pure collage. Given this attitude toward "modernism," it is surprising that critics like Tate did not respond with great enthusiasm when a poet like Charles Olson appeared on the scene shortly after the end of the second World War.

I thought of the E on the stone and of what Mao said
à lumière"
 but the kingfisher
de l'aurore"
 but the kingfisher flew west
est devant nous!
 he got the color of his breast
 from the heat of the setting sun!

The features are, the feebleness of the feet
 (syndactylism of the 3rd and 4th digit)
the bill, serrated, sometimes a pronounced beak, the wings
where the color is, short and round, the tail
inconspicuous .

This should have fit Tate's theory perfectly. The objects are there in all their autonomy -- the enigmatic mark on the stone, Mao's injunction to

action, the kingfisher as bird of the imagination, the kingfisher out of the natural history book. "The Kingfishers" is filled with many interjections, but none of them advises the reader how to react to the other "objects" in the poem. The interjected "truths" have an objectlike status which they share with Mao's words, the natural history text, the mythical material, the fragment of a contemporary party, bits of communication theory, the inventory of plundered Indian treasure, the elliptical anecdote of human slaughter. But if it fits Tate's theory, Tate was apparently unaware of it; one may search Tate's Essays of Four Decades, published as late as 1968, and not find a single mention of one of the most powerful poets and certainly the most graceful poet of the fifties.

But Tate was not alone in ignoring Olson, and there is no obligation on the part of a poet-critic to try to take a reasonable view of the contemporary poetic situation. Certainly both John Crowe Ransom and Delmore Schwartz, who had more reason to consider a force as powerful as Olson when they were reviewing at the Library of Congress the state of American Poetry at mid-century, managed not to notice him and to conclude, since they were apparently unaware of every significant younger poet in the country, that the "newest poets appear much more often than not to be picking up again the meters, which many poets in the century had thought that they must dispense with." As a statement of fact this was a complete misrepresentation of what was going on in American poetry in 1958. An alphabetical list of poets besides Olson who had already published at least one book and who were not "picking up again the meters" includes John Ashbery, Paul Blackburn, Gregory Corso, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Larry Eigner, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, David Ignatow, Kenneth Koch, Denise Levertov, Michael McClure, Frank O'Hara, Joel Oppenheimer and Jack Spicer, to name only the ones that come to mind most easily. These poets were very different from each other, then as now; and some of them, perhaps as many as half, may have seemed to represent a neo-Romantic sensibility, which the Southern formalists had opposed to a "modern" sensibility. Specifically a poet like Ginsberg might seem to have ushered in a return to Blake or Shelley (Romantic = Unmodern), and while this particular opinion is worth discussing, that's not what happened. As usual Tate is typical. In a 1968 essay he suggests that "much of the so-called poetry of the past twenty or more years [is merely] anti-poetry, a parasite on the body of positive poetry, without significance except that it reminds us that poetry can be written . . ." What is shocking about this suggestion is that it is based on what seems like a nearly trivial characteristic of this great body of diverse poetry: its disregard for metrical organization. In the paragraph I have quoted Tate explains that "formal versification is the primary structure of poetic order, the assurance to the

reader and to the poet himself that the poet is in control of the disorder both outside him and within his own mind." This bizarre statement seems very far from the immense human dignity of Tate's definition of the "Modern Poet": "Certain modern poets offer no inherently poetical objects, and they fail to instruct the reader in the ways he must feel about the objects. All experience, then, becomes potentially the material of poetry." Certainly the "assurance to the reader that the poet is in control" instructs the reader quite precisely in the ways he must feel about the objects. He must feel poetical about them, that is, he must experience no equivocal impulses that are likely to threaten the poetical frame that wraps these objects like a "pink ribbon." It is the pathetic hope of a virgin for an experienced lover whose competence (detachment) is sufficient to lead her to an orgasm, and all to be achieved by mere maintenance of a regular rhythm.

The great importance attributed to something so trivial as regularization of syllable accent by such relatively intelligent people as Tate, Ransom and Eliot is so remarkable that it deserves an essay of itself. But it is probably sufficient for our purposes here to point out that the value attributed to this phonological idiosyncrasy is symbolic. So that when Eliot insists on the value of the ghost of a meter lurking "behind the arras," it is because the image of meter is for him an image of some moral order (a tradition). It is this aspect of Eliot that is not "modern" but provincial. This becomes clearer in Ransom, who is very precise about the symbolic nature of meter.

I think meters confer upon the delivery of poetry the sense of a ritualistic occasion. When a ritual develops it consists in the enactment, or the recital over and over again, of some experience which is obsessive for us, yet intangible and hard to express. The nearest analogue to the reading of poetry according to the meters, as I think, is the reading of an ecclesiastical service by the congregation. Both the genius of poetry and the genius of the religious establishment work against the same difficulty, which is the registration of what is inexpressible, or metaphysical. The religious occasion is a very formal one, with its appointed place in the visible temple, and the community of worshippers congregated visibly.

You don't have to be especially committed to ritual or religion to observe that this is a kind of poetical Episcopalianism. The Sermon on the Mount was also a religious occasion; it didn't take place in a "visible temple" and

wasn't delivered in meter. But if the meaning of meter for Ransom is amiable and nostalgic, that is a triumph of personality. For Eliot and for Tate, as for their last disciple, Lowell, the loss of meter is equivalent to the loss of a whole moral order. It is a "domino theory" of culture -- first meter, then Latin composition, then In'ja. This persistent tendency to project any feature from any plane of human experience onto a single moral axis is an underlying characteristic of the particular brand of "modernism" developed by Eliot, Tate and Brooks. It is not a characteristic of Pound or Williams, and it is why Eliot and Tate will lead to Lowell and even Snodgrass, while Pound and Williams will lead to Rexroth, Zukofsky, Olson, Duncan, Creeley and so on.

The mentality behind this "moral" escalation is clumsy and pretentious. It has its roots in Eliot's criticism, in which it is so totally pervasive that a single instance should be sufficient to recall the entire tonality. In his essay on Baudelaire Eliot offers to gloss Baudelaire's aphorism: *la volupté unique et suprême de l'amour gît dans la certitude de faire le mal*. According to Eliot, "Baudelaire has perceived that what distinguishes the relations of man and woman from the copulation of beasts is the knowledge of Good and Evil (of moral Good and Evil which are not natural Good and Bad or puritan Right and Wrong). Having an imperfect, vague, romantic conception of Good, he was able to understand that the sexual act as evil is more dignified, less boring, than as the natural 'life-giving,' cheery automatism of the modern world. . . . So far as we are human, what we do must be evil or good." Which suggests that Baudelaire is, like Eliot, a moral social climber, energizing his sexual activity by reducing the whole complex domain of its human relations to a single moral axis with two signs: Good and Evil. The most amusing thing about Eliot's reading is that Baudelaire in no way suggests that "the sexual act" is Evil; what he says is that "the unique and supreme voluptuousness of love lies in the certainty of [its leading to] doing evil" -- presumably because of the complex set of nonidentical desires, expectations, and frustrations and their consequences in so close a terrain. The "voluptuousness" is like that of stock car driving, which will certainly lead to injury, though one does not seek it. Baudelaire was not from St. Louis.

This tendency to reduce all variation to clashes of opposites is part of what critics like Cleanth Brooks and I. A. Richards imagine to be characteristic of Metaphysical Poetry. Richards provides a theoretical analysis of two types of poetry which becomes the basis of Brooks's theory of the distinction between Modern and Romantic Poetry. Richards distinguishes between a poetry of "inclusion" (for Brooks, Modern and Metaphysical) and the poetry of "exclusion" (for Brooks, Romantic and Unmodern). The poetry of exclusion "leaves out the opposite and discordant

qualities of an experience, excluding them from the poem," the poetry of inclusion is a "poetry in which the imagination includes them, resolving the apparent discords, and thus gaining a larger unity." From this definition it follows that these two types of poetry are structurally different: "the difference is not one of subject but of the relations inter se of the several impulses active in the experience. A poem of the first group [exclusion] is built out of sets of impulses which run parallel, which have the same direction. In a poem of the second group the most obvious feature is the extraordinary heterogeneity of the distinguishable impulses. But they are more than heterogeneous, they are opposed [my emphasis]." This remarkable idea is based on a metaphorical vector analysis, in which it is absolutely necessary to imagine a poem as consisting of "impulses" seen as directed movements in a single plane for which a fixed set of coordinates has been chosen. It is only when we make all these assumptions that we fully understand Richards' idea of "opposed" impulses. They are magnitudes of opposite signs considered with respect to their projections on a single axis (toward or away from a zero point). It is because Richards has this precise analysis in mind that he substitutes the idea of "opposition" for the idea of "heterogeneity." Heterogeneity does not immediately simplify into a contrast along a single axis. To support this simplified vector analysis further, Richards redefines "irony" as a single dimensional reversal. "Irony in this sense consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses." This predictably leads to the tautologous observation that the poetry of exclusion is vulnerable to irony while the poetry of inclusion is not (because it includes it -- which is like saying that Czechoslovakia was not vulnerable to the Russian Army because it included it). Brooks seizes upon this analysis and identifies both the nervous and elusive, quibbling style of Donne and his version of "modernist" tradition with this trivial idea of monodimensional contrast. That the idea is trivial will become clear if we consider the situation of semantic contrast. For any two words in a language it may be possible to find a common semantic axis along which they may be ranked. For example: two adjectives "colloquial" and "thrifty" may be regarded as antonymic (possessing opposed signs) along the axis running from "Closed" to "Open," with "colloquial" moving toward "Open" and "thrifty" moving toward "Closed," though the extent to which either word is intersected by that semantic axis may not be equivalent or specifiable. Even "colloquial" and "blue" may have a semantic axis in common, e.g. Abstract -- Concrete (which might be exploited by a poet like Auden in a hypothetical line such as "They lived in houses / that were colloquial and blue"); and while it's obvious that from most viewpoints "colloquial" will run toward Abstract and "blue" toward Concrete, it should be equally obvious that the number of possible axes would con-

sist of all the innumerable antonymic pairs of the language and the most commonplace utterances would have to be mapped in terms of "hyper-spaces" that defy the imagination. But no one has attempted such mapping except Osgood, and he has not been concerned with relating his Semantic Differential to poetry. The effect of this imaginary vector analysis was largely to reduce the idea of complex poems to an idea of ironic poems, which is to reduce the complex "hyperspace" of modernist collage (Pound, Williams, Olson, Zukofsky) to the nearly trivial, single-dimensional ironic and moral space of Eliot, Tate, Lowell, and so on. This is the reason for not recognizing Olson. It was the same reason for not recognizing Zukofsky. They do not occupy a trivial moral space. The taste for the ironic, moral poem is a taste for a kind of pornography which offers neither intellectual nor emotional experience but a fantasy of controlled intensity, and like all pornography it is thoroughly mechanical. But machinery is quite imperfectly adapted to the human body and nervous system, which operates on different principles. As a result poetry such as Lowell's seems terribly clumsy as it continually seeks to reach some contrived peak of feeling while moving in the machine-cut groove of his verse. So lines like "I could hear / the top floor typist's thunder . . ." or "I sit at a gold table with my girl / whose eyelids burn with brandy . . ." come to be judged by Lowell himself in other lines like "My heart you race and stagger and demand / More blood-gangs for your nigger-brass percussions . . .," but they are misjudged. Lowell attempts to energize a poem at every possible point and the result is often pathetic or vulgar; Baby Dodds didn't push and was never vulgar. But it is the decadence of the metrical-moral tradition that is at fault more than the individual poet. The idea of a metrics as a "moral" or "ideal" traditional order against which the "emotional" human impulses of a poet continually struggle in the form of his real speech is a transparently trivial paradigm worthy of a play by Racine and always yields the same small set of cheap musical thrills.

The appearance of Olson and the Black Mountain poets was the beginning of the end for the Metaphysical Modernist tradition, which was by no means a "modernist" tradition but an anomaly peculiar to American and English poetry. It was the result of a collision of strongly anti-modernist and provincial sensibilities with the hybrid modernism of Pound and the purer modernism of Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams. Because of the intense hostility to "modernism" of Eliot, Ransom, and Tate, it was not possible for them to come into anything but superficial contact with it except as mediated through Ezra Pound, whom Eliot at least was able to misread as a fellow provincial, chiefly because of Pound's "Great Books" mentality. This was a mistake, for regardless of the material that he was manipulating, Pound as a poet was an inherent modernist

committed to the philosophical bases of collage organization, both as a principle of discovery and as a strategy of presentation. But it was a fortunate mistake for Eliot, because whatever is interesting about The Waste Land is only visible and audible as a result of Pound's savage collage cuts. Whatever is interesting and not vulgar -- because it is the speed of the collage-cut narration that rushes you over the heavy-handed parodies and the underlying sensibility, which is the snobbery of a butler. The return of collage modernism in the fifties had both semantic and musical implications. If it meant a return to the semantic complexities of normal human discourse in the full "hyperspace" of real language, it also meant an end to the ideal of "hurdy gurdy" music, finishing off once and for all the "dime store" eloquence of Yeats and the "general store" eloquence of Frost, along with the mechanical organ of Dylan Thomas, as anything more than shabby operatic genres that might be referred to out of nostalgia or an equivocal taste for falseness and corrupted styles. The appearance of Olson in Origin and in the Black Mountain Review signified the reappraisal of Pound and Williams, the return of Rexroth, Zukofsky, and the later return of Oppen, Rakosi, Reznikoff and Bunting; and it was quite appropriate for Williams to reprint Olson's essay on "Projective Verse" in his own autobiography, because it was the first extended discussion of the organizational principles of this wing of modernist poetry.

Starting as he does from Pound it is inevitable that Olson should see these organizational principles in "musical" terms. But Olson reads Pound very profoundly and locates the "music" of poetry in the origins of human utterance, the breath:

If I hammer, if I recall in, and keep calling in, the breath, the breathing as distinguished from the hearing, it is for cause, it is to insist upon a part that breath plays in verse which has not . . . been sufficiently observed or practiced, but which has to be if verse is to advance to its proper force and place in the day, now, and ahead. I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, this lesson, that the verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath.

It follows from the brief mythical description Pound gave to it in 1913:

You begin with the yeowl and the bark, and you develop into the dance and into music, and into music with

words, and finally into words with music, and finally into words with a vague adumbration of music, words suggestive of music, words measured, or words measured in a rhythm that preserves some accurate trait of the emotive impression, or of the sheer character of the fostering or parental emotion.

Pound's is the expressivist theory suggested by Vico and the eighteenth century music theorists and lurking for a long time in the European imagination. Olson places this idea, or that part of it he is interested in, on the plane of a kind of psycholinguistics: the pressure to utterance is supported by a surge of breath, which is alternately partially checked and released by what presents itself as a phonological entity -- the syllable -- until the breath charge is exhausted at the line ending. So Olson's Projective Verse is a theory of poetry as well-formed utterance, where "well-formed" means that it provides an adequate traversal of the poet's various energy states. This is full-fledged romantic theory, and whatever weaknesses it has, it offers the poet a broad array of new phonological entities to discriminate and play with and it places its reliance on the well-formedness of the language itself. So Olson will seek to articulate vowel music, to play upon patterned contrasts between tense and lax vowels, or compact and diffuse vowels, or vowels with higher and/or lower pitched prominent formants, to dispose of these under varying conditions of tenseness or laxness, or brevity or length in the environment of differentially closed, or closed versus open, syllables, under varying accentual conditions resulting from different position in words, in word groups, in sentences and whole segments of discourse. To this Olson adds a final discrimination in the notation of pausal juncture, and of shifts of attention and general speaking tempo and pulse. This vast repertory of possibilities inherent in the language was partially exploited by Pound and Williams, though Pound's overattachment to crude extralinguistic song and dance rhythms superimposed on the language tends to obliterate his linguistic refinement. It is possible that the weak point of this whole group of poets -- Pound, Williams, Zukofsky, Bunting, Olson, Duncan, Creeley, etc. -- is the metaphor of music itself, for the "music" they have in mind is based on a relatively conventional organization of pitches and accents. But because they are not dealing with "music" but language, and because there is a very imprecise analogy between language and music (as for example in the case of so-called "vowel pitch," where it is notorious that vowels do not have "pitches" but, all other things being equal, consist of variously amplified frequency bands impressed upon a fundamental carrier tone), they are not so seriously affected by the inadequacy of their theory of music (or dance), which still represents an

enormous advance over the absurdly trivial repertory of possibilities offered by meter.

It is this vastly enlarged repertory of possibilities that makes it possible for these poets to sustain with unerring, abundant and casual subtleties poems hundreds of lines long. Poems like "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" or "To Gerhardt, There, Among Europe's Things . . ." are each cantilenas of nearly 200 lines. They are difficult to give any reasonable impression of through quotes because the large curve of the music subsumes without blurring many sequences of intricately various detail whose sequential relations form a large part of Olson's poetics. To indicate how original this unforced sound was, one is compelled to quote mere fragments:

I pushed my car, it had been sitting so long unused.
I thought the tires looked as though they only needed air.
But suddenly the huge underbody was above me, and
the rear tires
were masses of rubber and thread variously clinging together

as were the dead souls in the living room, gathered
about my mother, some of them taking care to pass
beneath the beam of the movie projector, some record
playing on the victrola, and all of them
desperate with the tawdriness of their life in hell

I turned to the young man on my right and asked, "How is it,
'there?" And he begged me protestingly don't ask, we are poor
poor. And the whole room was suddenly posters and
presentations
of brake linings and other automotive accessories,
cardboard
displays, the dead roaming from one to another
as bored back in life as they are in hell, poor and doomed
to mere equipments

Then this moves quickly back to his mother in the "rocker / under the
lamp" ("she returns to the house once a week") and, picking up on the bit
of Indian song "we are poor poor," swings into

O the dead!
and the Indian woman and I
enabled the blue deer
to walk

and the blue deer talked,
in the next room,
a Negro talk

it was like walking a jackass,
and its talk
was the pressing gabber of gammers
of old women

and we helped walk it around the room
because it was seeking socks
or shoes for its hooves
now that it was acquiring

human possibilities

In the five hindrances men and angels
stay caught in the net, in the immense nets
which spread out across each plane of being, the multiple nets
which hamper at each step of the ladders as the angels
and the demons
and men
go up and down

Walk the jackass
Hear the victrola
Let the automobile
be tucked into a corner of the white fence
when it is a white chair. Purity

is only an instant of being, the trammels

recur

In the five hindrances, perfection
is hidden

I shall get
to the place
10 minutes late.

It will be 20 minutes

of 9. And I don't know,
without the car,
how I shall get there

Which raises the difficult if somewhat academic question of whether this is a return to "modernism." In principle it is built on Pound, and some details, taken out of context, sound like Williams ("I shall get / to the place / 10 minutes late"); but other details sound of Surrealism, translations of American Indian poetry, and so on. In the end this powerful and light way of moving is Olson's own. But even assuming that Olson and the other Black Mountain poets are thoroughly individual, which they are, it is still possible to see them as renovating and deepening the "modernist" tradition of Pound and Williams. There is certainly a transformation of Pound's idea of culture. Where Pound set out on a course to recover the cultural heritage of poetry, what he had in mind seemed at times to mean a collection of "touchstones." He was a collector of literary specimens. (But there was also the Frobenius, and Confucius and the Founding Fathers, and so on). Olson shifts the whole emphasis into an attempt to recover the cultural heritage of humanity, "The Human Universe." Similarly Robert Duncan, the other main theorist of the group, sets out to recover his version of the human universe and starts out to look for it in the exiled, abandoned and discarded knowledges, hopes and fears, magic, alchemy, the Gnosis, Spiritualism, etc. It is a deepening and widening of Pound's cultural career, though to the extent that Pound was involved in a cultural career he was not any more of a "modernist" than Matthew Arnold. Unlike the Frenchmen who were his contemporaries Pound had the advantages and disadvantages of provincialism. In 1914 Pound was still translating Latin epigrams, worrying about Bertran de Born, and advising his songs how to behave, while Blaise Cendrars had already completed "The Transsiberian Prose and Little Jeanne of France" and "Panama or the Adventures of my Seven Uncles." There was nothing that Pound had written that could compare to the "modernism" of:

Those were the days of my adolescence
I was just sixteen and I could no longer remember my childhood
I was sixteen thousand leagues from the place of my birth
I was in Moscow in the city of one thousand and three bells
and seven railroad stations
And I wasn't satisfied with the seven railroad stations and the
thousand and three towers
Because my adolescence was so hot and crazy

That my heart burned in its turn like the temple at Ephesus
or the Red Square in Moscow
When the sun sets
And my eyes were lighting up old roads
And I was already such a lousy poet
That I could never go all the way to the end

The Kremlin was like an immense Tartar cake
Encrusted with gold
With the giant almonds of the cathedrals all white
And the honeyed gold of the bells . . .
An old monk was reading the lay of Novgorod
I was thirsty
And I was deciphering cuneiform characters
When the pigeons of the Holy Ghost suddenly flew up from
the square
And my hands flew up too with the rustling of an albatross
And those were my last memories of my last day
Of my very last voyage
And of the sea

And I was a very lousy poet
And I could never go all the way
And I was hungry
And all the days and all the women in the cafes and all
the glasses
I would have liked to drink them and break them
And all the shopwindows and all the streets
And all the cabwheels whirling over the rotten pavement
I would have liked to plunge them into a furnace of swords
And grind up their bones
And pull out their tongues
And liquify all those huge bodies strange and naked under the
clothes that drive me crazy
I sensed the coming of the great red Christ of the Russian
Revolution
And the sky was a nasty wound
That opened up like a brasier

Those were the days of my adolescence
And I could no longer remember my birth

It drives on for more than four hundred lines of campy power, without a thought of the Odyssey or the decline of French letters, just the poet and a little French girl in the sleeping compartment of a train moving through Siberia past the dead and the wounded of the Russo-Japanese war. This is what we have come to know as the voice of the international "modern" style -- Cendrars and Apollinaire in France, Marinetti in Italy, Mayakovski, Khlebnikov and Yessenin in Russia, Attila Joseph in Hungary, and in the Spanish speaking countries Huidobro, Vallejo, Neruda, and Lorca. But in 1917 and 1918 Pound was writing for Poetry magazine on the work of Gautier, Laforgue, Corbière, Heredia, Samain, Tailhade, De Régnier and so on. Pound was twenty-five years behind European time, which does not mean that he was in 1890 Paris either. Pound never occupied Europe, present or past. He was living in American time, and in a truly provincial fashion he was trying to construct a literary methodology, a "language," that Americans could use out of a nearly random array of foreign excellences. In the case of French poetry the excellences of Gautier and Jammes, say, are in direct conflict with each other, and cannot be combined. Pound, who was both intelligent and sensitive, was well aware of this, but apparently unaware of the fundamental direction of French (or European) poetry, a growing hostility to and finally hatred of literature. And how could he have realized that, since the one thing he loved was literature? This was also naturally American and provincial. America had so little real literature that it must have seemed obvious to almost all Americans of Pound's generation and cultivation that what was required was a general reform of literary sensibility. The idea was that the genteel and trivial would fall by the wayside, and that a tough literary critical stance would result in literary masterpieces comparable to the Odyssey or the Canterbury Tales. The idea that these were not "literary" masterpieces and were not recoverable or even intelligible to "literary" men was not yet possible in America. But for the French it was another thing. Even in a sweet literary lyricist like Verlaine, the message of French poetry was clear: what is alive is poetry; "the rest is literature." So Pound and Eliot, both quite fluent at French, cannot even read Laforgue, not the Laforgue of Hiver or Dimanches, the casual tossed-off lines, lightweight and ridiculous. Everyone says that Eliot got his early style from Laforgue. Maybe. If you can imagine a provincial Laforgue amalgamated with Gautier's hard line and Tudor poetry as soon as it comes over into English. In French Eliot is different, as is Pound, but there it's possible to follow the actual sound of a French poet. Both Eliot and Pound carve at English, and when Pound doesn't carve it's all fin de siècle, like Swinburne. It is important to remember that the Americans were trying to get into literature and the French were trying to get out. And it is ironic that those of the French who didn't

follow Rimbaud or Lautréamont into their version of the anti-literary looked to Whitman to lead them out, while the Americans of the Pound-Eliot variety were embarrassed by the great predecessor because of his overt Romanticism and because of the anti-literary impulses embodied in the great catalogues and the home-made tradition of free verse. As Pound says in the poem to Whitman in Lustra,

I have detested you long enough.
I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father;
I am old enough now to make friends.
It was you that broke the new wood,
Now it is time for carving.

From the French point of view "breaking the new wood" is poetry, "carving" is literature. American poetry had not had this kind of modernism since Whitman, and the Pound-Eliot tradition does not contain it.

While Olson's representation of the Pound-Eliot-Tate tradition as the Pound-Williams-Zukovsky tradition went more or less unnoticed by anyone not directly involved with this recreation of American modernism, Ginsberg's amalgamation of Whitman, Williams, Lawrence, Blake, and the Englished versions of the French, German, and Spanish modern styles out of the chewed-up pages of old copies of Transition, View, Tiger's Eye, and VVV produced instant panic and revulsion. This is probably the poetry that Tate was referring to as "anti-poetry" in 1968. This was the only poetry that Delmore Schwartz knew the existence of back in 1958, outside the suburban lawns of the poetry by those he designated as "the new poets":

Before saying something more detailed about the character of the majority of new poets, some attention must be given to the only recent new movement and counter-tendency [my emphasis], that of the San Francisco circle of poets, who, under the leadership of Kenneth Rexroth, have recently proclaimed themselves super-Bohemians and leaders of a new poetic revolution Since these poets recite their poems in bars and with jazz accompanists, and since one poet aptly calls his book of poems "Howl," it is appropriate to refer to them as the Howlers of San Francisco

The wonderful thing about Schwartz's response to this poetry is that it

is couched entirely in political terms and takes the form of a defense of America presumably against

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing
America two dollars and twenty-seven cents January 17, 1956
I can't stand my own mind.
America when will we end the human war?

on the grounds that "since the Second World War and the beginning of the atomic age, the consciousness of the creative writer . . . has been confronted with the spectre of the totalitarian state, the growing poverty and helplessness of Western Europe, and the threat of an inconceivably destructive war which may annihilate civilization and mankind itself. Clearly when the future of civilization is no longer assured, a criticism of American life in terms of a contrast between avowed ideals and present actuality cannot be a primary occupation and source of inspiration Civilization's very existence depends upon America, upon the actuality of American life, and not the ideals of the American Dream. To criticize the actuality upon which all hope depends thus becomes a criticism of hope itself." All this artillery marshalled against a poem that goes on:

America stop pushing I know what I'm doing
America the plum blossoms are falling
I haven't read the newspapers for months, everyday some-
body goes on trial for murder.
America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies
America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm
not sorry
I smoke marijuana every chance I get.
I sit in my house for days on end and stare at roses in
the closet
When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid

The success of the style can be measured by the degree to which the "establishment" critics responded to this poetry as anti-poetry, anti-literature, and as sociopolitical tract. While there may have been contributory factors in the political climate of the Cold War and Schwartz's own mania, it is still hard to believe that this alternately prophetic, rhapsodic, comic, and nostalgic style could appear unliterary. But it did appear unliterary, primarily because the appropriate devices for framing "Modern" poetry and literature in general were nowhere in sight. Instead of "irony," it had broad parody and sarcasm; instead of implying, the poem ranted and bawled and

laughed; learned as it was in the strategies of European poetry, it was seen as the poetry of the gutter. Which demonstrates that a major factor that separated the Beat Poets from the Academic Poets was education, which the Beat Poets had and the Academic Poets did not have. They had been to school not only with Williams and Pound, but also with Rexroth, who managed to blend the Williams-Pound modernism with the European Romantic modernist style. So that it was natural for an alliance of sorts to form between the Beat Poets and the Black Mountain Poets. At about the same time a slightly more dandyish version of the European style appeared in New York. It was also "anti-literary" but advanced against literature the strategy of a gay and unpredictable silliness:

Be not obedient of the excellent, do not prize the silly with an exceptionally pushy person or orphan. The ancient world knew these things and I am unable to convey as well as those poets the simplicity of things, the bland and amused stare of garages and banks, the hysterical bark of a dying dog which is not unconcerned with human affairs but dwells in the cave of the essential passivity of his kind. Kine? their warm sweet breaths exist nowhere but in classical metre, bellowing and puling throughout the ages of our cognizance like roses in romances. We do not know anymore the exquisite manliness of all brutal acts because we are sissies and if we're not sissies we're unhappy and too busy.

It is a collage of poetic echoes, which gradually slides into a more straightforward assault:

I don't want any of you to be really unhappy, just camp it up and whine, whineola, baby. I'm talking to you over there, isn't this damn thing working? . . . It's not that I want you to be so knowing as all that, but I don't want some responsibility to be shown in the modern world's modernity, your face and mine dashing across the steppes of a country which is only partially occupied and acceptable, and is very windy and grassy and rugged. I speak of New Jersey of course

In Frank O'Hara's hands it is a poem like a ridiculous telephone conversation, moving between a preposterous high style ("oh plankton / mes

poèmes lyriques, à partir de 1897, peuvent se lire comme un journal intime . . ."), bits of gossip and pseudogossip ("John, for instance thinks I am the child of my own old age; Jimmy is cagy with snide remarks while he washes dishes and I pose in the bathroom . . ."), bits of pop song and Silver Screen nostalgia, and sometimes a very precise "run" on real (unpromoted) and false (promoted) feeling:

why do you say you're a bottle and you feed me
the sky is more blue and it is getting cold
last night I saw Garfinkel's Surgical Supply truck
and knew I was near home though dazed and thoughtful
 what did you do to make me think
 after we led the bum to the hospital
 and you got into the cab
 I was feeling lost myself

There were sufficient reasons for these different groups -- Black Mountain, the Beats, and the New York school -- to quarrel among themselves, and there were such quarrels. In one issue of Yugen Gregory Corso, representing the rhapsodic tendencies of the Beats, took a swipe at what he considered the pedantic musical concerns of Olson, and was promptly stepped on by Gilbert Sorrentino, who dismissed him as a presumptuous idiot. But quarrels like this were minor and trivial in duration. These poets all read together and published together in magazines like Yugen, which formed a common ground for the New York and San Francisco scene and for publications of translations of various European modernist poets. The bonds that held these poets together were more profound than any differences: a nearly complete contempt for the trivial poetry of the last phase of the "closed verse" tradition and more significantly the underlying conviction that poetry was made by a man up on his feet, talking. At bottom all their images of "writing a poem" are a way of being moved and moving, a way of walking, running, dancing, driving.

The dance
 (held up for me by
an older man. He told me how. Showed
me. Not steps, but the fix
of muscle: to move

I do not seek a synthesis, I seek a melee.

It's like going into a spin in a car -- you use all

the technical information you have about how to get the car back on the road, but you're not thinking "I must bring the car back on the road" or else you're off the cliff.

If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep."

It was not quite an idea of an "oral" poetry, not yet. Outside of Parry and Lord's work on the South Slavic guslar poets and some well-reasoned speculations about Homer and Beowulf, nobody knew much about that. But a change was coming over the idea of "writing" poetry, perhaps reinforced by the proliferation of readings. Although these poets did not identify the "performance" of a poem with the poem itself, they also did not identify the text of a poem with the poem itself. Olson calls it a "notation," and the idea of the text of a poem as a "notation" or "score" occupies a middle ground between an idea of oral poem and an idea of literature. It is easiest to see this in music, where it is abundantly clear that eighteenth and nineteenth century scores are insufficient to yield a skilled performer enough information to play the music reasonably. An adequate performance of Bach or Mozart or Beethoven requires a familiarity with the conventional context that directs the performer how to read (interpret) a score. Obviously the figured bass tradition relied more on the musical civilization of the performer than did the later nineteenth century. And there was a lesson to be learned from this too. Who can play the Hammerklavier at the instructed tempo? And how much brio is con brio? This shifting view of the relation between text and poem, which was not something these poets were thoroughly aware of, led to two totally different conclusions in the poetry of the sixties: Concrete Poetry, which assumes sometimes with marvelous perversity that the text is the poem, and direct composition on tape recorder. But for America both of these possibilities were played out in the sixties by many other poets. In fact it was the sixties that saw the great explosion of American poetry. If there were perhaps twenty or thirty strong poets among the Black Mountain, Beat poets and the first generation of the New York school, it is probable that the number of impressive poets to appear in the sixties is more than double that. For those of us who came into the arena of poetry at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties, the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, the New York poets represented an "opening of the field." They had swept away the deadwood, the main obstacle to the career of poetry; and they offered a great claim for the meaning of poetry: that phenom-

ological reality is "discovered" and "constructed" by poets. Speaking for myself I thought then and still think that the claim, when its implications are clearly articulated, is quite reasonable. It is part of a great Romantic metaphysic and epistemology that has sustained European poetry since Ossian and Blake and Wordsworth and is still sustaining it now. If the particular representations of reality offered by these poets of the fifties seemed less useful or adequate, this seemed less important and partially inherent in the Romantic metaphysic itself, according to which reality is inexhaustible or, more particularly, cannot be exhausted by its representations because its representations modify its nature. The poets of the sixties simply went about the business of re-examining the whole of the modernist tradition. By now we have had to add to the fundamental figures Gertrude Stein and John Cage, both of whom seem much more significant poets and minds than either Pound or Williams. This itself is the merest of indications. All of European Dada and Surrealism were reconsidered in the sixties; poets like Breton, Tzara, Arp and Schwitters, Huidobro, and Peret were reclaimed along with many others. But beyond this there was the recognition that the essential aspiration of Romantic poetry was to a poetry broad enough and deep enough to embody the universal human condition. We are better equipped now linguistically and poetically and perhaps shrewder about what is at stake in this type of project. At present there is now going on a total revolution in the consideration of the poetry of non-literate and partially literate cultures; and this reevaluation is not a mere collecting of texts but a reevaluation of the genres, with enormous implications for the work of present poets. This surge of activity is already transforming the poetry of the sixties, which is itself far too rich to treat in this essay.

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