CONTENTS

The Situation of Poetry

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND ITS TRADITIONS

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To the Memory of
B. E.
and of
A. Y. W.

PREFACE

This is not a survey, nor a selection of the best or most promising work being done. Rather, I try to explore principles: some of the problems and opportunities of this current moment in poetry. Those problems and opportunities may be defined by considering what part the poetry of the past, especially the poetry of the immediate past, seems to play in the mind of one who is about to read or to write a poem.

The traditions meant by my subtitle are modernist and, beyond that, Romantic. I have in mind something a little like the relation between the later seventeenth-century English poets and the earlier ones. Not that poets now writing are doomed to be at best mere Wallers and Lovelaces compared to the Donnes and Jonsons of fifty years ago; rather, theory and practice in an art may at some times change radically and swiftly or, at other times, at a kind of historical minimum pace.

Such historical changes in the way poets write, and in ideas about poetry, interest me more than the alleged "influence" of one writer upon another. Indeed, "influence" is a problematic concept, in that it assumes a simple causality where such

causality can rarely, if ever, be demonstrated. The better the writing, the more likely it is that "affinity" will be a more useful word. The complex idea of causal "influence," as distinct from the older and simpler idea of imitation or emulation, is itself a continuing idea, or tradition.

In fact, the idea of influence, insofar as it emphasizes the irresistible force of one personality upon another, is a Romantic tradition, implying that poetry expresses unique internal forces rather than imitating an objective world by technical means that may be shared. For me, the neutral terms "affinity" and "tradition" offer ways to discuss how a poet may have been affected by other poets: by unlikely combinations of poets, by minor poets, by an idiosyncratic personal favorite, or even by a poet one does not much respect. The poet may carve out a conscious or unconscious model combining the Anglo-Saxon poem *Deor*, a phrase from a bad translation of Vergil he once read, and a trick of Campion's. For the most part, such webs are invisible and undiscussable.

When the network of reference and reliance in relation to the past is visible, and is discussable, and is in fact part of the poem's technique—a technique that openly or tacitly depends upon the reader sharing the same experience of past writing—then the term "tradition" applies. This book is an essay about the current state of the modernist tradition. In it, I assume that the force of a tradition is normally felt through an intricate, shifting constellation of poems, as through the air we breathe, and—with perhaps an exception or two—not through some single, necessarily major poet or poem.

"Contemporary" for present purposes will refer roughly to work appearing since, or not much before, 1959, when I first encountered the delights and wisdoms of the art, as practiced by living poets. Roughly speaking, I begin with the safer ground of work by older writers and move toward younger generations as I go.

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I. Introduction

I. "Modern" and "Contemporary"

Modern poetry was created by writers born about a hundred years ago. The premises of their work included a mistrust of abstraction and statement, a desire to escape the blatantly conventional aspects of form, and an ambition to grasp the fluid, absolutely particular life of the physical world by using the static, general medium of language. Those premises are paradoxical, or at the least peculiar, in themselves. Moreover, the brilliant stylistic inventions associated with the premises—notably the techniques of "imagism," which convey the powerful illusion that a poet presents, rather than tells about, a sensory experience—are also peculiar as techniques.

Or, they once seemed peculiar. These special, perhaps even tormented premises and ways of writing have become a tradition: a climate of implicit expectation and tacit knowledge. As such a tradition remains alive, it changes and grows, and much of the growth consists of extending principles further in their logical directions. As a general example, to be filled in later,[1]

consider those contemporary poems that tend, pretty distinctly as such matters go, toward coolness: the aspect of modernism that effaces or holds back the warmth of authorial commitment to feeling or idea, in favor of a surface cool under the reader's initial touch.

A previous generation sometimes sought such coolness of surface through concentration on objective images. But the indirect, imagistic manner of, say, Williams's "Spring and All" or Stevens's "The World as Meditation" can seem explicit, moralizing, rhetorical compared to the amused remoteness of, say, James Tate's "Blue Booby" or Jim Harrison's "Trader."[2] For many contemporary poets, the effective practice seems to be based upon a particular kind of voice: enigmatic, slangy, fey, tough, idiosyncratic, darting between the plain and the daffy with a mock-naive, teenage sort of detachment. That detachment, a knowing, ironic superiority to parts of one's own mind and experience—the "cool" of high school in the early sixties or late fifties—defines the manner for me better than reference to surrealism or location in California or New York. To some extent, the poems of Stevens, Williams, and other modernists have supplied this later manner with a starting point, an aesthetic equivalent or crystallizing form. It seems worthwhile to investigate the strength and nature of that continuity.

My thesis in this book is that we learn many of our attitudes toward language and reality from the past, and that it takes considerable effort by a poet either to understand and apply those attitudes, for his own purposes, or to abandon them. The alternative to such effort may be to lapse into mere mannerism or received ideas. All of this seems to be particularly true because we have a body of great poetry in our recent past. That poetry,

modern poetry, the formidable work done by Crane, Eliot, Frost, Pound, Stevens, Williams, Yeats, and others, has been dealt with in such penetrating detail that we have many alternative, illuminating ways to describe it.[3] Poetic modernism, often a self-defining, introspective art to start with, still exerts all the momentum and attraction of a successful revolution; academically, modernism has already become one of the most skillfully studied, the most ingeniously explained, of the historical periods of poetry in English. And while the poetry of that period recedes into the historical, it remains fairly widely read, quoted, and admired, and not only by professional scholars.

But while modern poetry constitutes a distinct and perhaps even a massive entity, especially at American universities, little of value has been done to show how, or whether, modern poetry operates as a heritage, let alone as a tradition, for contemporary poetry. Modern poetry often expressed or implied certain persistent ambitions, ambitions that have to do with giving the poem some of the status of an object or phenomenon, rather than a statement. Though one cannot apply the idea in Procrustean fashion to all contemporary poems, a surprisingly wide range of work does seem to be illuminated by considering such inherited motives, and the techniques associated with them.

Moreover, those inherited motives involve a conflict, potentially severe, between the poet's medium and, on the other hand, his convictions about reality and art. His medium ties the poet to words, which are conventional referents, and to sentences, which are—even when fragmented—conventional arrangements. And verse by definition implies recurrence, if only a recurrence to the left-hand margin. Pound[4] tells us to go in

fear of abstractions, but recurrence is an abstract form, and every word is an abstraction or category, not a particular: "foot" is no more concrete than "trepidation" or "cosine," and "large foot" or "Robert's large foot" merely add categories.

The poet's medium, then, is abstract, more or less discursive, and in some senses conventional. But his convictions about reality and art are likely to be pervaded by the idea that reality inheres in particulars, not abstractions; in experience, not in discourse or convention. Experience may well seem fluid and instantaneous, but language is sequential and, once uttered, relatively fixed. These are the broad, cold outlines of a conflict that inspired the dazzling solutions and accomplishments of modernism, an extraordinary, manifold transformation of poetry in English. The conflict and the accomplishments remain, and have their relevance to most of the work, good and bad, in current numbers of *Poetry* magazine or in new volumes of poetry.

Finally, it is no mere hedge to add that the exceptions are of interest partly because they *are* exceptions; and that, having inherited a tradition, one may deal with it by eschewing it or reacting against it. Some conventions operate most clearly when they are violated or discarded, like the proscenium arch, the boundary line in a game, the omniscient narrator, a mating custom, a given poetic diction. For instance, the blank verse of Keats, Landor, and Wordsworth will offer more delight and wisdom to the reader who understands that the poet has cultivated an avoidance of the mere Miltonism that plagued the eighteenth century. (In the same way, one can better perceive the controlled lushness of diction and line in the blank verse of Wallace Stevens in the light of his freedom from Victorian

Keatsism.) The avoided possibility is not simply negative, but also a principle the artist exploits, knowingly attaining new virtues impossible without it, impossible perhaps to comprehend without it. Nor did the nineteenth-century poets I have named need to forget all that they learned from Milton, in order not to Miltonize.

There are more direct, specific ways to support the contention that contemporary poetry is by and large traditional. In beginning to take up the job of such proof, and the job of exemplifying the term "tradition," I will try to illustrate the idea first in the relatively obvious case of unsuccessful work; then, in the more elusive, more interesting relationship between a successful poem and its traditional element. In the first instance, the examples involve the traditional nature of a specific device, or bit of style; in the second, a concept.

II. Examples

I will start where I hope not to end, with the borrowing of attitudes and mannerisms (often trivial) indicated by the expression "derivative." It is easy—and ultimately not enough, however instructive—to find descendants of Pound's testy ellipsis, or his use of foreign words like "polis" for monumental concepts; Crane's combination of high language with physically high visual perspective in lyrical-ironic city scenes; Eliot's choral, sinister adaptations of baby talk, slang, noises; Yeats's use of stylized, rather pre-Raphaelite physical gestures as poetic shorthand for emotions, as in "rocked and sobbed," "danced and cried out," etc.; or Williams's charmingly informal addresses to his wife, mother, neighbors. While such instances prove only

the most mechanical aspect of a tradition, the stubbornly recurrent ones may reveal matters of deeper significance.

That is, mere similarity with the past does not necessarily indicate a living relationship with it; the outer husk may persist without the spirit, or only the spirit of ornament. Yet the nature of the tradition may show itself in those ornaments, however hollow, which do persist; for instance, the egregiously "fresh" descriptive similitude (like a comic's one-line gag) when the device means essentially that the writer has the status of a poet: inventive, observant, unpredictable.

This characteristic figure can serve as an emblem for one important, continuing strain in the style of modernist poetry. At one of its sources, in Wallace Stevens's pineapple that is

> the coconut and cockerel in one

or in Marianne Moore's fir trees

> each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top

attention to the context will show that the dandyism is virtually always not naive, but ironic. Stevens or Moore may nod, and this irony itself may become mechanical and second-rate—but it is there, a sort of stylistic diffident cough, a self-effacing exaggeration of gesture. By means of it, the poet indicates both his wish to vanish in favor of the object, and his inability to do so as totally as the descriptive power of the same, oddball image or analogy promises.

As Hugh Kenner says of Moore, an essential aim is:

> . . . to avoid implying that a cat or a fish has never really been looked at before.[5]

Stevens often builds overripe alliteration and assonance in a similar spirit; the figures of sound embody an elegantly apologetic derision, directed at the regrettable intrusion into a poem of the poet's own imagination, foppish and cavorting. This alliterative mode or trick of Stevens's seems essentially his own, with no host of descendants comparable to the million gems of contemporary "description" or "impressionism" that are essentially exhibitionist in motive.

By "exhibitionist" I mean that the aggressive yoking of unlike things can sometimes amount to little more than showing off. Unlike Moore or Stevens the poet does try, precisely, to imply that a cat or a fish has never really been looked at before. A main contemporary form of the bardic, such writing ranges from the enigmatically poetical, as in the solemn poem called "Silence," which begins

> The fall has come, clear as the eyes of chickens[6]

to the ingenious entertainment or set piece, as in the poem or group of poems inviting the reader to look at the cardinal numbers through a poet's eye:

> 3 Shallow mitten for a two-fingered hand
>
> 4 Three-cornered hut
> on one stilt. Sometimes built
> so the roof gapes.[7]

These examples, especially the first, hold out an inherited mannerism without fully understanding it, so that it becomes a kind of gaud or badge establishing that the writer is a poet; the mannerism is like an ancestral tool whose function has

been lost. The second example simply asks the reader to admire an acquired way of writing for its own sake, in the absence of a living subject; the fanciful or analogical manner is not reflected upon, but instead is limply accepted as though it had always been there, and therefore is interesting in itself, a part of life.

This is a negative sense of tradition: some hard-won, complex part of the historical inheritance is taken for granted; we forget that it *is* historical and full of meaning, and it is used for some trivial or base purpose: the spray-painted cobbler's bench, entwined with plastic foliage. Such examples illustrate the mastery and elaboration of a way of writing after the motives in life for that way of writing have become obscured. The presence of a powerful tradition, if it is ignored, can have that effect, leading us to expend force on self-regard at the expense of life, trivializing the ambitions of poetry. (Even the modest rights to life of a set piece can be trivialized, or not.)

Parenthetically, an important distinction can be made here: Moore or Stevens might imply that a fir tree or a pineapple has never been so well *described in words;* but that is to refer us as readers to the standard, ultimately, of our own experience of such fruits and trees. In contrast, the line quoted above tells us that our own experience of chickens and autumns is inferior or irrelevant. We are referred, ultimately, neither to the season nor to the fowl, but to what a deep imagination the poet has. This distinction underlies my use of "life" in the preceding paragraph, and what I understand Pound to mean by "the 'thing' whether subjective or objective."

This single unit of style—a certain kind of figure of speech, the egregious, clipped descriptive comparison—is not pre-

sented here as some kind of forbidden practice. Such a turn of writing is neither good nor bad in itself, though it often may be most clearly identifiable when least assimilated. The point is that the device is significant and familiar; such prevalent mannerisms help to support the idea that a wide range of recent poetic styles may share certain historical roots—both healthy ones and otherwise.

The avoidance or converse of a convention also confirms its force—expressed, for instance, as an irritation with the potential foppery of metaphor, a will perhaps to avoid it at all costs. In effect, such purified or planed-down writing makes into practice, and into explicit declaration, what was implicit in the penumbral, self-mocking overtones of Stevens. This style is the symmetrical reverse of the lines just quoted, which preserve the dandyism without the ironic reservations.

Robert Creeley, in this as in much else, shows a winning and useful directness:

> Could write of fucking—
> rather its instant or the slow
> longing at times of its approach—
>
> how the young man desires,
> how, older, it is never known
> but, familiar, comes to be so.
>
> How your breasts, love,
> fall in a rhythm also familiar,
> neither tired nor so young they

> push forward. I hate the metaphors.
> I want you. I am still alone,
> but want you with me.[8]

The poet's resolve to avoid the dandyistic descriptive rhetoric of "the metaphors" appears here speaking with puritanical, nearly fanatical plainness. If the poem is not slack, it narrowly avoids slackness through the nervous pressure of that puritanism.

Consider another poem, called "Diction," in which Creeley laments

> The grand time when the words
> were fit for human allegation

Certainly, he has in mind more than the single kind of metaphor in question, aligning himself with the view, associated with Pound and Eliot, that language as a whole has been, or may become, debased. But more specifically, as the literary and even technical title, "Diction," suggests, part of the debasement originates with poets and "the metaphors." "The metaphors" exemplify what Creeley is at pains to avoid in the terrifically tentative, artificially "natural" language of the first Creeley poem quoted. This dogged, obsessive plainness works its way, in the second stanza

> how the young man desires,
> how, older, it is never known
> but, familiar, comes to be so

practically to the point of inarticulateness. And the descriptive third stanza avoids flashy rhetoric in favor of simple "human

allegation" with such perceptible care that the effect is nearly fussy.

Creeley's poem seems to me quite different from the two fragments quoted earlier: worthy of taking seriously, and even as a pleasure. For instance, the sentence:

> How your breasts, love,
> fall in a rhythm also familiar,
> neither tired nor so young they
>
> push forward.

Without narcissism or pseudo-wit, the woman's body, moving, is associated companionably with the stirring of desire. The lines are credible, and therefore preserve the last stanza ("I am still alone . . .") from mere bathos. Though neither convincing as naturalistic speech nor persuasive as sharp physical description, these words about the human body achieve a patient, somewhat weary, sincerity. This quality of authenticity, rather like the moving gruffness of Barnabe Googe or George Gascoigne, is defined well enough by the word "allegation": not the thing itself, but words about the thing—and proud of it.

But if the fall that is "clear as the eyes of chickens" and the tediously clever "Cardinal Ideograms" put the poet between the poem and the reader, Creeley's language in this poem—so chastened that it seems to aspire toward some kind of non-language—does something similar. The puritan makes his reader too conscious of a matter as irrelevant as the dandy's "good imagination"; the poem is blocked by a sense of struggle, the writer trying desperately to follow his own directive to join art and life more sincerely than "the metaphors."

Moreover, what we get is less the struggle itself than its outward effects in a style of constant asides, conflicting tones whose relation to the subject is partly mysterious: without clear reason, the poem's tone is knowing, inhibited, fatigued, oddly self-conscious.

The "thing itself," the post-symbolist image, the whatever-we-call-it, does not appear in Creeley's poem as in the two earlier examples and the exaggerated style they can stand for: not, that is, as a once-powerful token, an uncomprehending savage ornament or an emblem of bardic rank; but it does appear as a kind of ghost. The modernist reservations about ornament, and indeed about words themselves, persist; while the image, the technique inspired by that mistrust, is itself spurned as one more form of ornamental verbiage. That is why the flat idiom of this poem seems worn down rather than sculpted. Its relation to a naively "imagistic" piece of writing recalls the saying that the ordinary man is ruined by the flesh lusting against the spirit, the scholar by the spirit lusting too much against the flesh. In neither case can the poem's relationship with a dominant past be made entirely successful.

I have tried to suggest the common roots of two varying and familiar contemporary styles, roots in modernist practices and issues. Perhaps every age has its plain style and its rhetorical style, but it is certainly not my purpose to divide all contemporary poetry into Fop and Puritan parties. Rather, the point is that in this the late modernist period both of those styles, and others, seem to base themselves upon some of the same grounds: prominently, a dissatisfaction with the abstract, discursive, and con-

ventional nature of words as a medium for the particulars of experience.

That dissatisfaction may be expressed by pursuit of the physical image purified of statement, or in other instances by pursuit of an "allegation" purified of imagistic eloquence. In either case, the dissatisfaction is ultimately insoluble because of the nature of words and verses, but the great body of modern poetry demonstrates what a rich terrain of possibility the problem provides. The contemporary poet exploring that terrain will find himself in the presence of modernist terms and strategies.

INDEX OF NAMES