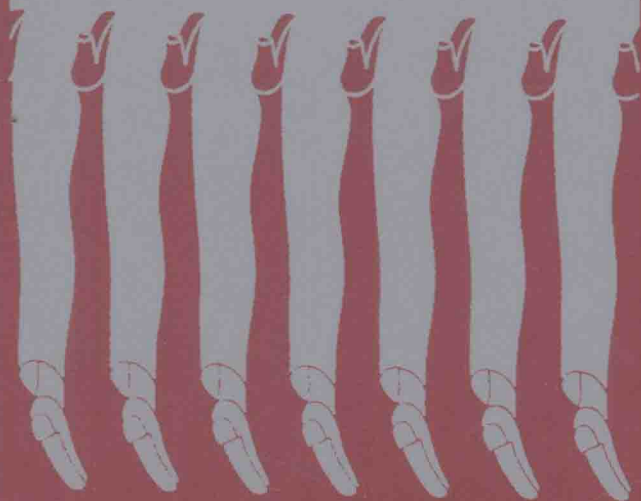


Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

MODERNISM AND POETIC INSPIRATION

The Shadow Mouth

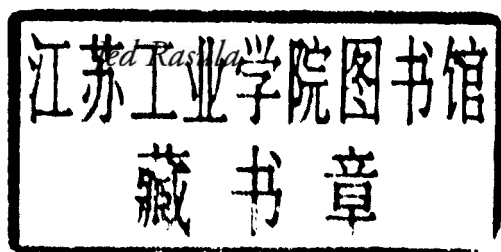
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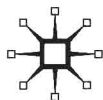
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Modernism and Poetic Inspiration

The Shadow Mouth



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Preface

The subject of this book is poetic inspiration, but this is not a trans-historical account. Most of the work I attend to is from the past 150 years. Yet much of the primary research involved concerns ancient Greek prototypes (Muse, Orpheus, Medusa). There is precedent: the sense of modernity in poetry I address here derives from Mallarmé, who characterized his aspirations in terms of an “orphic explanation of the earth.” Orpheus—having suffered infernal descent in vain, subsequently torn apart and beheaded by the Maenads—has been astonishingly reanimated in the twentieth century (by Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* most famously, but also Cocteau’s films, and countless artworks and musical compositions).

Gramophones
Pianolas
Orgues
Tous répètent la musique d’Orphée

Le 11 septembre
Sur la Tour Eiffel
Il donne un concert T. S. F.
(*Lyrik* I, 218)

These lines from Yvan Goll’s “Le nouvel Orphée”—the title poem of his 1923 book—despite the uncanny premonitory date linking the inaugural radio broadcast in Paris with the attack on the World Trade Center eighty years later, attests to an Orphic dissemination through modern mass media, which might seem as inimical to Rilke’s pastoral Orpheus as Baudelaire’s famous embrace of metropolitan vulgarity for its poetic nourishment. But the quotidian, the daily dross, he insisted, though half of “modernity” in art, was *only* half; so a host of mythological figures roam Baudelaire’s Paris like

the oldest homeless people on earth. If most of the poems cited in the following pages are modern, their authors felt (“in their bones” T.S. Eliot says) a mythopoetic silt underfoot.

Any book that appears to capriciously dart about from antiquity to modernity will seem peculiar, especially a work of scholarship. But as with a previous book, *This Compost*, this one tilts the application toward poetics. That’s to say, the writing itself is not an instrumental expedience; it vibrates to the sound waves of its subjects. Nearly every page portends a three dog night. I abide by Laura Riding’s supposition: “To go to poetry is the most ambitious act of the mind” (*Poems* 410), though there’s no denying the pretentiousness of speaking about “poetry” as such, and the abject lark of that pretence extends to all the other subjects thronging at the gateway here: muse, inspiration, voice-over, not to mention *murmur* and *blank* and all the country cousins given passkeys with such terminological abandon. Guilty on all counts, I offer this study as a plea-bargain with fellow travelers, those who know themselves in Riding’s sense as “equal companions in poetry.” The full context behind Riding’s salutary insistence on companionship between reader and writer is worth quoting, and heeding:

In poem-writing and poem-reading the stirring up of the poetic faculties has been a greater preoccupation than their proper use; the excitement of feeling oneself in a poetic mood has come to be regarded as adequate fulfillment both for the reader and the poet. Hence the frequent vulgarity “What is this poem *about*?”—when the reader feels that there is an element in a poem beyond that designed to evoke in him the flattering sensation of understanding more than he knows. . . . The trouble is that as poets have transferred the compulsion of poetry to forces outside themselves, so readers have been encouraged to transfer their compulsion to the poet: the poet in turn serves as muse to them, inspires the reasons of poetry in them. And the result is that readers become mere instruments on whom the poet plays his fine tunes . . . instead of being equal companions in poetry. (408, 411)

Riding’s “companions in poetry” resonates with Robert Creeley’s dedication to what he called “the company” of fellow poets, artists, and readers *held in trust*; and these configurations in turn are picked up by Robin Blaser in his homage poems to “Great Companions,” Robert Duncan and Dante Alighieri.

The germination of material for this book goes back to the early 1990s when I gave talks at various conferences and institutions sparked by a question one panel organizer had posed: “What do we talk about when we talk

about poetry?" I welcomed the provocation, as it made me realize that "we" (in the public domain, in thrall to anthologies with titles like *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*—twisting the thematic screw of Wallace Stevens into the moral *agon* of nationalism) invariably presume that voice to be speaking about "us." I wrote an exercise in literary sociology on that subject, *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, pondering the fractured, discontinuous, uneasy situation of poetry appropriated for some ostensibly universal but invariably parochial cause—poetry taken under the wing of a charitable institution, beneficently taken for granted, and neutered in the process. My term "poetry's voice-over" made its debut in the model of the wax museum (cf. *Wax* 36–51), where it referred strictly to a *special effects* studio, a.k.a. the English Department of the New Criticism and the consequent intersections of reputation and expectation it engineered.

In *Modernism and Poetic Inspiration* I follow a completely different way of thinking and imagining voice-over, more honorary than onerous, but not without its perils and traumas. Literary history requires document, proof, but a work of poetics (stimulated all the while by every kind of evidence that comes to hand) really sails by the seat of its pants, takes nothing for granted. Where poetics is concerned, there is no risk assessment, nor any assurance of gain or predictable outcome. It's more a matter of getting your head around something. The political term for this prospect is *anarchism*, and as this book elaborates, *an-archē* encompasses that which is ungrounded, without foundation, as well as what is *baseless* in a telling vernacular expression. It will seem paradoxical to cite a precedent for this unsecured vulgar locality, but that's a role Mallarmé plays here, the poet of *Un coup de dés* with its typographic theatre of unmoored destinies. "For him," Jacques Rancière observes, "every poem is a layout that abstracts a basic scheme from the spectacles of nature or of the accessories of life, thereby transforming them into essential forms. It is no longer spectacles that are seen or stories that are told, but world-events, world-schemes" (*Future* 94). To this disarmingly expansive prospect, I would balance the scales—and welcome the reader aboard—with Marianne Moore's salient menu from "Picking and Choosing":

only the most rudimentary sort of behavior is necessary
to put us on the scent; "a right good
salvo of barks," a few "strong wrinkles" puckering the
skin between the ears, are all we ask.

(*Poems* 138)

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Introduction

Shadow Mouth

To speak in earnest about the Muse in the twenty-first century is tantamount to admitting a paradox, which is that poetry persists despite its attachment to what might seem a disabling anachronism. This is hardly an original consideration; Robert Graves made the same point fifty years ago in *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*: “I am still amused at the paradox of poetry’s obstinate continuance in the present phase of civilization” (3). Graves’ mission in *The White Goddess* is dedicated to a fundamentalism evident in his vocabulary:

The reason why the hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat is constricted, the skin crawls and a shiver runs down the spine when one writes or reads a true poem is that a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust—the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death. Housman offered a secondary test of true poetry: whether it matches a phrase of Keats’s, “everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear.” (12)

Though their ranks may be dwindling, there are those who still speak of the “true poem,” happy to legislate its formal criteria, and content with the gendered division of labor in the “great tradition.” But “the ancient power of fright and lust” need not preserve the social arrangements that validated it. What’s more, the challenge of modernity makes it difficult to detect anything quite so primeval as spine tingling panic in a poem—or, as Emily Dickinson felt it, the sensation of having the top of one’s head taken off. This may, of course, be evidence that what’s called poetry is merely a stylized

social exchange, personal preoccupation, career opportunity, or blog. Rather than legislate what is and is not a *true* poem, I'm more curious about the "obstinate continuance" of the urge to compose poetry, and the persistence with which the urge retains the archaic term *muse*. It would be easy to say that whatever is now casually meant by Muse has no connection with the ancient sense of the term. After all, the historical evidence Graves brings to bear on the subject makes it unlikely that any modern poet, including Graves, could be plausibly linked to his white goddess: his rowan berries, druid riddles, and bull-footed god are hardly the unvarying ingredients of poetry. But as I've suggested in *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry*, the commanding factors of a planetary life impose sufficient conditions of continuity to perpetuate the archaic force of poetry.

Aesthetic theory in the West has rested firmly on Aristotelian criteria for two millennia, during which poetics was primarily a theory of genres. Genre takes on very different inflections in modernity, however—especially modernity in the broadest (post-Gutenberg) sense. "If conditions for a positive reception of lyric poetry have become less favorable, it is reasonable to assume that only in rare instances is lyric poetry in rapport with the experience of its readers," observes Walter Benjamin, sensibly adding: "This may be due to a change in the structure of their experience" (*Illuminations* 156). Benjamin's monumental dossier of nineteenth-century Paris, *The Arcades Project*—which may someday be recognized as a companion to *The Cantos*—is dedicated to the pursuit of this phantom transformation in human experience. More recently, the Dutch phenomenological psychiatrist J.H. van den Berg devoted many volumes to the study of historically specific mutations in psychology, for which he coined the term "metabletica," science of changes.¹

The present book is a study of the sources and resources of poetic inspiration, exploring those aspects of poetry that supplement the concept and experience of the poem; but while it goes back to Hesiod for a primal scene from which the authorizing figure of the Muse derives and has held sway ever since, my investigation is guided by the conviction I share with Benjamin and van den Berg—namely, that the mutability of human nature transforms all cultural activities over time. Poetic inspiration now is demonstrably different than it was two thousand years ago (and, for that matter, two hundred years ago). But the legacy of the Muse persists insofar as it offers instruction about the unexpected, unwarranted, and sometimes unwelcome promptings that issue in poetry. From the Greek Muse to modern communications models of cybernetics—from divine infusion and mediumistic spell to noise-free channels and optimal bandwidth—poets have identified strategies to gain access to some enabling prompter. By means as diverse as

calculation and hallucination, procedural methods and systematic derangement of the senses, poets have pursued the urge to be animated by the protolinguistic pulse of signification. Since Mallarmé this has become an explicit compass for the poetic engagement with modernity.

The key factors impinging on modern poetics, from the perspective of metabletics or the science of change, are: (1) the invention of printing and (2) the concomitant consolidation of vernaculars, leading to (3) erosion of the authority of the classics, signaled most conspicuously by (4) the rise of the novel, the preeminent literary genre of modernity. A set of conceptual coordinates amplify the impact of these four factors: (5) the Copernican revolution, and (6) the European discovery of the Americas impose a burden of self-authorization on “man,” a burden exacerbated by (7) Darwinian evolutionary theory, with adjustments in estimating the role of race and gender as a recent refinement of the theory. Historically and culturally, (8) the collapse of the *ancien régimes* and the rise of the bourgeoisie inaugurate modernity as a condition characterized by change—and various species of revolution—and (9) a corresponding collapse of the biological *ancien régime* and the consequent population explosion fueling urbanization and industry, situates human affairs in a notably defamiliarized world. Finally, as a kind of literary footnote relative to these immoderate transformations, (10) genres undergo renewed scrutiny in the transition from “letters” to Literature in its gradual absorption into modern educational and cultural institutions.

Modern poetics engages—and often affirms—these transfigurations in the name of: (1) plain speech, and the modernizing of diction and vocabulary; (2) generic openness or indeterminacy; (3) typographic and orthographic opportunity; (4) infusions of prose order and prose standards; (5) linguistic nationalism; (6) programs of emancipation, including political agitation as well as the cultural avant-garde; (7) strategies of defamiliarization as modernizing means; (8) a rising culture of individualism; (9) the affirmation of the sacred mission of poetry. The enumeration could be extended, but this is enough to emphasize the transformative (and *deformative*) pressures brought to bear on poetry, especially in the last century. A quick elaboration of these issues will bring me to the point of considering what’s at stake in the ongoing retention of the Muse tradition.

The platform envisioned for a specifically modern poetry in Emerson’s essay “The Poet” and in Whitman’s affiliated prefaces and “backward glances” appended to *Leaves of Grass* affirm the initiatives enumerated above. Autobiography is the “colossal cipher” envisioned by Emerson and embraced by Whitman, tacitly pioneered by Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. The Americans stress the democratization of subject matter, Emerson in particular insisting that poetic inspiration cannot be expected to comply with decorum. Poetic

empowerment means that everything serves as an exponent of meaning: high and low are equally eligible (one of Whitman's favorite poses is *candor*). This amounts to a doctrine of noninterference, not being meddlesome, acknowledging poetry's alliance with dictation and transcription while risking frivolity. This aptitude of pure expectancy, attentive to the slightest prompting, retains the legacy of the Muse while also infusing it with the spirit of Christian devotional exercises and Protestant soul-searching, in which spirit is its own evidence, and Emerson's "metre-making argument" (450) is propositionally reconfigured by Robert Creeley's "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (as memorialized by Olson in "Projective Verse" [*Prose* 240]). Creeley was preceded by the Russian Futurist Alexei Kruchenykh: "Once there is a new form, a new content follows; form thus conditions content" (Lawton 77), and by Kandinsky in the *Blue Rider Almanac*: "*Form is the outer expression of the inner content*" (149). It's a proposition that could be extended far enough back in time to make it seem oracular, which it is. For sacred mission to be distilled from the spirit of the times, when those times are crassly commercial and heedlessly opportunistic, may seem surprising; but Whitman's characteristic boosterism is not discrepant with his larger purpose. He was professionally situated in the reigning communications medium of his day, the popular press, gaining from that experience an immersion in the vernacular unrivalled by his genteel peers.

Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* reminds the reader that "the language of such poetry as is here recommended is, as far as possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men" (Hazard Adams 440). When Whitman reiterates the case for plain speech, he spells out the implications for versification: "The poetic quality is not marshalled in rhyme or uniformity or abstract addresses to things nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts . . . The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush" (11). Taking a distinct cue (close to plagiarism, in fact) from Emerson, and anticipating Baudelaire's avowal of metropolitan provocation, Whitman also proposed as the "direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is today" that a poet should "flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides," and in a veritable prescription for generic indeterminacy, "in the swimming shape of today [the poem grasps] the ductile anchors of life, and makes the present spot the passage from what was to what shall be, and commits itself to the representation of this wave of an hour" (23–24). The wave of an hour was most vividly manifested in the newspaper, the display type and arrangements of which would eventually inspire Mallarmé's typographic emancipation of the poetic page. While not known at the time, orthographic experiments by Emily Dickinson and

Gerard Manley Hopkins mark an adventure by which the poet composes not only the words but the letters and the page, the look of it, anticipating initiatives that come to a head in the typographic exuberance of the Russian and the Italian Futurists.

The ubiquity of prose by way of newsprint helped substantiate the rise of the novel from novelty to serious aesthetic aspiration, news that stays news as Pound would have it, and Pound (thinking of Henry James) famously urged fellow poets to heed the call in his remark that “poetry should be at least as well written as prose” (*Essays* 373). Pound had an exceptionally acute ear for the vernacular, but resisted what he took to be Wordsworth’s heedless pursuit of plain speech. So his Imagist dictum about “direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective”—along with his emphasis on verbal economy—follows Ford Madox Ford’s quip that “Wordsworth was so intent on the ordinary or plain word that he never thought of hunting for *le mot juste*” (Pound, *Essays* 3, 7). In fact, Wordsworth too recommended prose as a model: “the language of a large portion of every good poem,” he wrote, “even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the meter, in no respect differ from that of good prose.” Furthermore, “some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written” (Hazard Adams 40). William Butler Yeats dramatized the point in his 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* by rendering Pater’s prose evocation of Mona Lisa as free verse. Various initiatives—from *vers libre*, Hopkins’ sprung rhythm, Pound’s emphasis on the musical phrase as preferential to the metronome, Williams’ variable foot, to Charles Olson’s projective verse—are concessions to an encompassing domain of plain speech and prose writing. The phenomenon of the “prose poem” is otherwise unthinkable; and, as initially envisioned by Baudelaire, arose as a distinctly modernizing gambit: “Which one of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience?” (*Paris Spleen* ix–x).

Linguistic nationalism is itself a species of print culture predicated on the development of the vernacular. Given a huge boost in the wake of various democratic revolutions following in the wake of the American and the French ones, a new domain of “invented traditions” promoted various forms of linguistic allegiance in which poets were lionized as “the supertadpoles of expression” in Marianne Moore’s memorable phrase (*Poems* 152). Shakespeare was for the English what Dante was for the Italians, and Goethe to Germans. The Finnish folk-epic *Kalevala* was assimilated in an unusually direct transfer from orality to print (prompting Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*).

But it was surely under the archaic halo of bardic glamour that nineteenth-century poets like Tennyson, Hugo, and Pushkin held such distinguished places in national pride. At the far end of this association is Whitman's hyperbolic bit of patriotism in the preface to the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "The United States themselves are the greatest poem" (5). Linguistic nationalism was predicated on demonstrable forms of political enfranchisement, much as it would also be infused with opportunism and chauvinism. Insofar as poets felt themselves meaningfully invested in plain speech, and energized by the vernacular in all its variety, they couldn't help but conflate poetry with political destiny. Shelley dimly makes this out in his impetuous characterization of poets as "unacknowledged legislators" of mankind (Hazard Adams 529). Rimbaud is more ardent, but more precise, in acclaiming the poet as "truly the thief of fire . . . responsible for humanity, even for the *animals*." Responsibility rather than legislation would be the poet's burden. "Enormity becoming normal, absorbed by all, he would really be a *multiplier of progress*!" Rimbaud went on, recognizing singularly among his male peers, "When the endless servitude of woman is broken, when she lives for and by herself, man—heretofore abominable—having given her her release, she too will be a poet!" In the meantime—Rimbaud, at seventeen, is patient—"let us ask the *poet* for the *new*—ideas and forms" (309). Rimbaud's notion of the new may or may not be the same as Pound's famous demand, Make It New, but the poetic craft of *making* merged with the constant unveiling of thresholds through which modernity appeared with if by historical inevitability, such that poetry became more closely aligned with *the new* than with its longstanding task of cultural conservation.

As Pound's verb *make* suggests, there is labor involved, work to be done. The new might seem to pour down effortlessly from the abundant conduits of modernity, but a different sort of sapience was required for the poet to actually inaugurate the *vita nuova* of a renovated poetic domain. Again, Rimbaud signals the shift with his grammatical twister and existential challenge: "*I* is someone else" (*Je est un autre*) (305). Reiterating ancient wisdom, Rimbaud observes that the "first study of the man who wants to be a poet is the knowledge of himself, complete," but then he spells out what this entails, which is not at all in line with humanist self-cultivation: "the soul must be made monstrous: in the fashion of the *comprachicos*, if you will! Imagine a man implanting and cultivating warts on his face. I say one must be a *seer*, make oneself a *seer*. The Poet makes himself a *seer* by a long, gigantic and rational *derangement of all the senses*" (307). Such strident gestures of self-making were recognizably Bohemian, challenging conformism and political retrenchment after the 1848 revolutions. The figure of the dandy, the *poète maudit*, cultivated by Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Nerval, Verlaine,