VON EDWARD UNDERWOOD

A HISTORY THAT INCLUDES THE SELF

Essays on the Poetry of Stefan George, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens

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To my Father and Mother

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Robert Penn Warren: . . . –not a golden age, but the past imaginatively conceived in the strictest readings of the researchers. The past is always a rebuke to the present; it's bound to be, one way or the other; it's your great rebuke. It's a better rebuke than any dream of the future. It's a better rebuke because you can see what some of the costs were, what frail virtues were achieved in the past by frail men. And it's there and you can see it, and what it cost them, and how they had to go at it. . . . The drama of the past that corrects us is the drama of our struggles to be human, or our struggles to define the values of our forbears in the face of their difficulties.

Dorothy Bethurum: It's also encouragement.

Robert Penn Warren: It's encouragement.

–*Fugitive's Reunion: Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 2-5, 1956*, ed. R.R. Purdy (Nashville, 1959), p. 210.

The four main chapters of this dissertation are not intended to be portraits of figures from a golden age. They present a quandary faced by four poets who saw and met its challenges in four different ways. The literary history, art history, and biography that are mixed with close reading in these essays are therefore included more in the spirit of Plutarch's *Lives* than of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. Plutarch wrote of Greeks and Romans in the same chapter, often in pairs, drawing parallels and comparisons that deepen our understanding of both figures despite the cultural and historical gap between them. He presented men of some character, though not always heroic, facing similar challenges, at spearpoint, so to speak, though in different circumstances. These essays have neither Plutarch's scope nor his scale, since I am concerned only with poets and with only four at that. Although I keep the individuals in separate essays, I have, however, brought together a German, an Austrian, and two Americans, the eldest of whom, Stefan George, was born fifteen years before the youngest, William Carlos Williams. My purpose is not only to show that these four poets share in a common dilemma–one that is central to my understanding of the poetry of the modernist era–, but also to show in what different forms

the quandary emerged for each of them, how difficult it was to answer, and what the implications of answering the quandary in a particular way have been. As a result, in these essays the distinctions between biography, literary history, and criticism are from time to time ignored. In presenting these four poets I have wanted to include in Robert Penn Warren's phrase, "what some of the costs were, and what frail virtues were achieved." This kind of criticism, admittedly broadly conceived, meets a need for the recovery of context, a need which I have felt and believe other writers and critics may also feel.

The dicta of modernism are naturally bandied about within earshot of apprentice poets and critics. This turns out to be a dangerous practice, since we adapt them immediately to our own contexts, apply them to our own work, and give them meaning solely in reference to the ongoing course of discussion. The result is a kind of *Sortes Virgilianae* of modernist texts which ought to make us uneasy. A part of the work of overcoming that uneasiness is accomplished by reading the poems and essays in which these phrases appeared and studying their relationship to earlier poems and essays. Yet the story of the costs and the frail virtues achieved still needs to be recovered before these phrases can lose their chiseled and immutable character, and the full rebuke and encouragement the rich past of modernism has to offer can begin to emerge.

The past, of course, cannot be perfectly recovered or understood, much less represented completely. This, however, makes the kind of recovery of context that is mixed with close reading in these essays neither more futile nor less potentially rewarding than any other sort of historiography. The context included is "the past imaginatively conceived" in my own strictest readings of the primary and secondary materials, insofar as it is relevant to how the central quandary of these essays developed and was resolved. For those who, like myself, have felt this need, the recovery of context is an important task if we are to keep our forebears human, assuming of course that they were human. This seems to me to have become a pre-requisite for understanding modernist poetry.

A reader who anticipates a generational study in a very close sense will think of other

German and Austrian poets who might have been chosen for comparison with Stevens and Williams, and of other Americans or Englishmen for comparison with George and Hofmannsthal. There has been a tendency, for example to compare imagism with expressionism, since both movements focused considerable attention on the image, and a number of the poets in both movements were born in the 1880's. To my knowledge, not many of these comparisons are able to go very deeply into either imagism or expressionism in the course of the comparison. It seems to be going too far, in any case, to conclude on the basis of such comparisons that these two movements belong to a single generation. Birth dates alone are not much help in distinguishing generations across cultures. Stevens, for example, is five years younger than Hofmannsthal, but six years older than Pound. And George is only six years older than Hofmannsthal. How many years shall we count, then, as dividing one generation from another? And where shall we start to count? A "generation" ought to share a common language, a common cultural history, and a number of common experiences. And here the difficulty of sorting through the complex commonalities and differences between cultures as different as those of Germany, Austria, and the United States were in the early years of the century becomes forbiddingly clear. Perhaps we can think instead of parallel generations in different cultures, but here also the problems exceed the benefits. There is no guarantee that the cultural and historical factors that would make for a new generation would occur simultaneously in two or more cultures. The equivalence might be skewed, and its evaluation ought to depend on some very sharply conceived criteria for comparison. Comparing and contrasting exact contemporaries is an important and useful enterprise, as is comparing Homer and Virgil, or Homer and Dante, or even Homer and Pound. Our arguments about generations, however, require a different sort of analysis.

The current study may be thought of as a generational study only in a much broader sense. All four of these poets belong to modernist poetry, or to poetry of the early twentieth century. They have in common a dilemma that is part of a larger modernist crisis

which can also be traced in the other arts. Like Plutarch, I am aware that between two figures such as Stefan George and William Carlos Williams a cultural and occasionally a temporal gap must fall that goes beyond their extreme differences of personality. The comparison between these four poets and their responses to the crisis of the modern era, however, can both inform the parallels and I hope sharpen the contrasts between these poets and others with closer or more distant birthdates, both in their respective cultures and in others.

I chose Stefan George, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens for these essays because their responses to the dilemma I had noticed among a number of modern artists were particularly clear and very different from each other. That makes it possible to present the crisis clearly and to suggest a range of responses. I had in mind that these four poets could serve as points of orientation in the broader spectrum of modernism. In the conclusion, more will be said of how these four poets might be placed in that broader spectrum.

Since this dissertation is not conceived as a generational study in the strictest sense, the crisis of modernism and the dilemma that I argue stands at its center for modern poets need to be described in a general way here in the introduction. Two of the developments that mark the crisis felt across all of the arts were of special relevance to the poets. First, the attraction toward the master-works of the tradition came to be in sharp conflict with the artist's desire to express his sense of his world. The natural desire to emulate, to follow and to contribute to the tradition became difficult to reconcile with the desire to express contemporary experience. Secondly, the drive to discover transcendence in the language, that is, in the writing, ran afoul of an humanistic skepticism and irony. Words like "honor" and "nobility of spirit," to choose two examples, in the nineteenth century invoked a set of presuppositions about cultural behavior which had changed by only a decade or so later in the twentieth century. When the disparity between the codes of behavior and meaning evoked by a word and the current value of those behaviors and connotations becomes too

great, the concept is strained, and a dark irony is naturally born like that which pervades so many works of art in the early twentieth century. When more and more fundamental presuppositions are challenged, language begins to lose its recourse to ideals beyond words and experience. As consensus vanishes, words lose the sublimity afforded by higher cultural values. The "nobility" of a person, of a course of action, of a conception, or of a word, then evaporates before the skeptical mind, and immediate experience and the non-transcendent, tactile, compositional qualities of words are pushed into the foreground. Similarly, the recourse beyond language to a tangible, trustworthy reality was also undermined in this period. With realism also exposed as an illusion, again, the non-transcendent qualities of the medium were thrust forward as the sole avenue for experimentation in the search for new values. Inspiration and transcendence no longer ran hand in hand in this period, and rigorous, skeptical self-criticism became a mark of intelligence. The result was the opening of a rift of difference between modernism and the past, which all modern artists, in their own ways, sought to resolve.

The four poets of these essays faced this crisis as a much more specific kind of writerly quandary. Its characteristic features appear in something like the following order:

1. The crisis starts with the recognition of a false start. Acknowledging a false start should be distinguished from merely recognizing that one has to establish independence from a master whose work one has been apprenticed. A writer can come into his own without necessarily feeling that something was wrong or false in the direction originally taken. To acknowledge a false start is to call a direction into question and entails questioning fundamental ways of thinking about poetry and ways of making poetry. Such questions for poets are not simply more or less abstract or practical kinds of intellectual puzzles. They belong rather to the realm of personal crises, and perhaps to the realm of epistemological crises, since for poets a way of writing, in some disturbing manner, is a way of being.

2. A somewhat one-sided intellectual history of Western Civilization since the realist-nominalist controversy could be written to show the progressive development and extension of skepticism and an ever-deepening critique both of our claims to objective knowledge and of subjectivity. The humanistic skepticism and the sense of irony that develops in the modern era and sets itself against the natural drive toward transcendent statement certainly deserves to be seen in the light of that larger historical development. In modernism, however, this general tendency can also be seen, at least in part, as a natural result of the questioning consequent upon a false start. For the sincere questioning made necessary leads to a kind of agnostic, nominalistic revelation. This revelation, which is the second characteristic feature of the quandary, is agnostic because skeptical about the ultimate value of any very penetrating understanding of the world, and nominalistic because skeptical about the role of language in fashioning an understanding of the world. The limitations of language and the opacity of art have so often been made a point in modernism that the limitations of language have often been made, or seem to have been made, a metaphor for the limitations of the human condition. Language, and the artistic materials of the other arts as well, have been foregrounded to an unprecedented degree in the modernist period. Both of these closely related kinds of skepticism may be occasioned by a false start.

A false start can cause the system of relative values expressed in the admired works of earlier poets, or by a movement in the arts, to be called into question, and a skepticism toward the specific kinds of values in question results. If the poet can no longer hold to the values assumed or absorbed from the tradition, he also has trouble giving them up. As he looks at the common sense world of his time, it becomes clear that it is no less arbitrary in its valuations than the tradition. It, too, seems a patchwork of received and unexamined phrases. To accept it is as dishonest as consciously adopting the unexamined life that Plato declares not worth living. And yet, at this point in the questioning, the poet cannot think

himself much better off. He has no solution until he writes his way out of his bind. He must improvise a solution, though he has no guarantee that the effort will not turn out to be another false start. This leaves him, for the moment at least, as a kind of agnostic, though he must find a way to work as a poet or cease to be one.

The doubt of the validity of such systems of value is one of the most profoundly disruptive kinds of doubt in the crisis of modernism. It may be seen as a part of a more general crisis in ethics and aesthetics provoked by changes in the political, social and economic order of the world. While the poets were subjected to the same general strain, they were also experiencing a pressure brought to bear on the aesthetic values specific to their artistic tradition as well. More will be said on this general theme in passing in the introduction and in the essays themselves.

Linguistic crisis and language skepticism are much more discussed in German critical works on modernism than in American criticism. I need only point out here that one way of putting words together has failed and that the common sense way of using language has been seen through as well. The system of language seems closed and to a great extent arbitrary. The accuracy of words has been undermined, and the basis of the value judgements upon which conversation depends begins to fall apart. The result is that words become opaque, and while they remain important for the creation of works, and more of their properties may be placed at the poet's disposal, nevertheless, the created worlds they evoke no longer can correspond to anything. The possibilities of language and technique are foregrounded, but the poet must see them with a skeptical eye. The words themselves seem to have risen in mutiny against convention, but without convention, how should words be ordered and to what end? Before this question, these four poets experienced various kinds of excitement and occasionally a desire to retreat.

3. This brings us to a more specific kind of questioning that develops with regard to poetic traditions, and that is a questioning of assumed formal and aesthetic values. It is these

values upon which judgements of formal accuracy and the trueness or rightness of lines and other measures are based. They amount to conventions about the nature and use of artistic materials, and it will be useful here to divide them into two groups: notions of form and notions of decorum.

By notions of form, I mean those conventions by which a work of art is given its internal coherence and its external shape. In this sense, for example, a pentameter in blank verse, with internal binding and harmony sustained by the use of alliteration and assonance, such as bind together the long and various expanses of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, performs a function similar to that played by the establishment of a key and certain rhythmical and motivic structures, together with traditional harmonic structure in the musical compositions of the nineteenth century: they provide for the work's coherence and unity while they do not account for its inspiration. By notions of decorum, I mean the conventions about the sources and qualities of usable materials, the proper effects to create, the emotions which an artist may excite or exhibit in a work of art, conventions as to subject matter or theme, and also the kinds of poses and gestures fitting to significant art. Notions of decorum are conventions by which expectations are established and according to which we judge what is shocking or inappropriate in a work of art.

The questioning of such conventions about the nature and use of artistic materials–notions of form and decorum–is one of the central features of the quandary faced by the poets of modernism. It is also probably the most singular distinguishing characteristic of modernism more generally, in all of the arts. Such notions have been picked apart, exploded, rethought and defended with a zeal and urgency shared by few if any other periods of art history. A moment's reflection about Impressionism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Minimalism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, or atonal and serial composition is enough to suggest the extraordinary range and vigor of these explorations.

There are two kinds of plausible explanations, advanced by the artists themselves as to how and why the re-evaluation of such fundamental notions of artistic materials came to

be necessary. They may be called "emergence theories" and "incompatibility theories." They are, I think, complementary kinds of explanation.

According to the theories of emergence, as the possibilities within the conventions established in great works of the past were developed, the rich possibilities for variation first became accessible. The history of the arts through the nineteenth century shows both an unprecedented development of formal exploration and also an ever increasing experimentation with departure from formal expectations. Composers realized the richness of expressive potential in transitional passages when the effect of the tonal center was temporarily suspended. Painters began to experiment with degrees of freedom from the conventions of various sorts of representation and experimented with the effects of color and line thus freed from representation. Whitman carried cadence beyond the confines of metrical structure and Hopkins invented sprung rhythm. Variation opened the way to the expressive possibilities that lay beyond the key, beyond representation, and beyond meter in the uncharted ranges and registers of language. At the same time, such experimentation raised the question of how to compose those uncomposable expanses which, almost by definition, lay outside the scope of the conventions themselves. In short, it is possible to see the great formal questions of modernism emerging in the history of experimentation within the traditions themselves. It is possible to see such questions as the next step in the continuation and expansion of those traditions, despite the fact that nothing less than a fundamental re-interpretation of the nature of form was necessitated.

Theories of emergence go a long way toward explaining the need for this kind of re-evaluation, and yet they have shortcomings. As Stevens wrote, "One might have thought of sight, but who could think / Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?" In like form, we could comment in this context that one might have thought of experimenting with new ranges of diction, new kinds of imagery, and new kinds of resonance found as new and different sorts of materials were taken in, but who could have thought of the new ranges of diction themselves, or of the ferocious experiences of the era and the new words, colors,