Cry of the Human Essays on Contemporary American Poetry

Ralph J. Mills, Jr.

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Essays on Contemporary American Poetry Ralph J. Mills, Jr.

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To Helen, for the years—

"Like a choice
Returned to and returned to, like
A luminous choice"

Henry Rago

—and to my children, Natalie, Julian, and Brett, with love.

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Foreword

What I like about Ralph Mills is that he is not a didactic critic. He is not authoritarian. He is not dogmatic. He does not weave through the waters like a hammerhead shark. He is not out to kill you if you do not believe him.

He is an aesthetic critic, a man of sensibility who loves his subject and leads the reader with gentleness, justice, and enthusiasm, with sympathies and penetrations to let him see what he sees, feel what he feels, so that this kind of humane and nontoxic criticism can be a joy to read. If you know the poets, you may return to them refreshed by his insights. If you do not know them, or partially know them, his earnestness, sensitivity, and charm of relating are so genuine that you may wish to make your own total discoveries of the poets from his persuasions, his devotion to telling his truth.

Another way to say it is that some criticism is so severe that it is hard to read, so high-handed that as reader you lose the fundamental sense of poetry as giving pleasure in welters of intellection giving instead a kind of pain.

Mills's criticism is easy to read and is thus refreshing, and at the same time it is instructive, clarifying, and energizing. He shows the way but does not tell his reader how to feel. This new kind of criticism is better than the old so-called New Criticism which laid down the laws about a poem and if you did not take its teaching you were considered unworthy as a reader. If you did not conform, it paid a disrespect to your own true critical responses.

Why do I like what I call aesthetic criticism, or impressionistic criticism, or call it appreciative criticism better than dogmatic, didactic, hierarchical criticism? I feel that it must be due to the nature of the times. Our times are chaotic, kaleidoscopic. We have lived

through depression, war, more war. I think of Spain, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the cold war, atomic weapons, loss of religion, overpopulation, drugs, divorce, crime, dishonesty in government leading to Watergate; all these realities plus others militate against any one standard in criticism, any absolute value or value system.

Johnson in the eighteenth century had it easier than any of our critics today. He had a more or less stable society, indeed, an Age of Enlightenment, and he could deduce rules of writing from established rules of conduct. He could be reasonable, extol reason, and take a commonsense point of view.

In some ways we are better off because our times are so wild. But to be dogmatic now is to be absurd. And to uphold the absurd as a final value is more absurd. It is too late for Arnold. His brave idea that poetry will save us is true only in a delicate intellectual balancing act wherein supposedly we become better because more sensitive. But poetry did not alter the wars and other forces mentioned above.

Because of our present situation, and the splendid vigor of our diverse poetry, it seems to me that a personal, democratic criticism like that of Ralph Mills is much to the point of these times—a sharing of sensibility and enthusiasms with readers, a wish to show and to explain, in no way a wish to compel, or to beleaguer, but to exemplify relative attitudes as against absolute attitudes or dogmatic claims. These are relevant, too, and may appear again in the future, but I enjoy Ralph Mills's critical presentations of the poets he has chosen because of his love of poetry, which he expresses sincerely and convincingly.

The build of the book is refreshing. In an introductory chapter Mr. Mills looks over the field. The field of poetry is wide and great in America. He writes a chapter on Roethke which is informative, revealing, and gives a clear indication of his scope, interests, concerns, and progress. The bulk of the work is in three full chapters on Ignatow, Hall, and Kinnell. He could have chosen other poets from the wide contemporary field, and this book is so engaging

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that I hope he will engage other new poets in the future. His last chapter is a less full but rewarding chapter on Levine.

What I like about Ignatow is that you do not have to think about Marvell. He has no reference to Benlowes. He does not care about Beddoes. What I like about Ignatow is that he knows about Ignatow. I like the totality of his humanity. He is a people and I like the people.

What is the use of negative criticism? Fortunately, Mills is positive, yet not with a sledge hammer. Should I give Ignatow bad marks for not suggesting Marvell, or Benlowes, or Beddoes? He may know them, for all I know, but he does not show them. He shows himself, streets, people, the common sufferings of mankind, his, mine, yours. He tends to be prosaic, but what of that? Others tend to be poetic; read them.

Roethke had a sense of Elizabethan form and forms, and Berryman wrote a complicated imitation in the manner of Dante. Hall began in a convention of elders and in an early period wrote a moving poem about ancestors, nature, and New Hampshire, but then he suffered a sea change into the something rich and strange that Mills takes many pages to explain. Hall's change of style and interests shows the depths of his psychic penetration into arcane reaches of the spirit in a wide variety of poems in new makes of his own.

Kinnell knows that much of poetry comes from below the head. He could have learned this from Lawrence but he learned it from life, from himself. His personalism and passion, his unrelenting look at the truth preserve his deep knowledge in poems about the porcupine and the bear, the latter one of the best animal poems, surrogate for the animal man, of these times. To sophisticate dark places, bring a complex order to sprawling conditions, is a feat of Levine. "Everything we/say comes to nothing," but the rich nature of Levine alights on words to make poems anything but nothing, nothing if not anything but brilliant.

RICHARD EBERHART

Preface

The essays gathered in this book with one exception—a study of Theodore Roethke's last poems, written for an earlier occasion—represent my chief critical interests and efforts since the late 1960's. As such, I suppose they can be fairly viewed as a continuation along the lines indicated in a previous volume, Contemporary American Poetry (1965); indeed, the essay on Roethke included here picks up where the chapter on him in that collection left off. But the present book, unlike its predecessor, is not designed to offer a spectrum of poetic endeavor in this country in recent years, except insofar as the opening paper surveys an aspect of American poetry which gained prominence during the preceding decade or so. Nor are the other essays intended to support any sort of programmatic purpose. All the same, they follow naturally from the considerations and predilections evident in "Creation's Very Self." and the reader will perhaps discern even more correspondences and connections than the author can.

It remains, then, to say a few words on the essays treating the work of David Ignatow, Galway Kinnell, Donald Hall, and Philip Levine. My critical preference has always been for poets of substantial achievement whose writings either have been neglected or have received only minimal discussion, thus enabling me to approach their poems with a sense of freshness and discovery. That sense was very strong with the above-mentioned poets and led, in three of the instances, to considerably longer essays than I had at first anticipated, for the emergent patterns, themes, and imagery of their poems required increasing elaboration as the process of writing about them went on.

While the decision to write about these poets was personal, based

on my own deep attraction to their work, no apologies are necessary for the choices. Initially, each essay was composed with separate publication in mind; later, at a friend's prompting, I saw that combined with the Roethke study and "Creation's Very Self" they formed a coherent but not binding whole. Ignatow, Kinnell, Hall, and Levine demonstrate through powerful vision and originality of style how the American poetic imagination has grappled fiercely and inventively with the challenges set by the character of life since the mid-century. The openness to experience and the search for new, authentic modes of expression which are commented upon within the somewhat generalized framework of "Creation's Very Self" find exemplary figures for more detailed examination in these accomplished and highly individual poets.

No doubt a number of other poets of similar forcefulness and talent could be added to or substituted for those who are here. Critics and readers will easily supply the important names of Bly, Creeley, Olson, O'Hara, Ashbery, Simpson, Merwin, and so forth, for themselves. But the overall conception of this book, as I see it, belongs to the realm of the suggestive rather than the comprehensive, if it belongs to anything. It reflects my own feelings and taste, too, and may, of course, imply my restrictions and blind spots. In any event, it tries to sidestep theory and strict thesis, to refuse partisanship and to maintain independence. A poet-critic friend, Al Poulin, once observed that my criticism was romantic and personalist. I accept the definition. The ensuing essays result from a basic sympathy for and imaginative commitment to the poetry and poets that are their reason for being.

There can be for many writers no return to the traditional conception of God as the highest existence, creator of all other existences, transcending his creation as well as dwelling within it. If there is to be a God in the new world it must be a presence within things and not beyond them. The new poets have at the farthest limit of their experience caught a glimpse of a fugitive presence, something shared by all things in the fact that they are. This presence flows everywhere, like the light which makes things visible, and yet can never be seen as a thing in itself. It is the presence of things present. . . .

-J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality

And what I am proposing is that, toward the end of a new baptism for the modern imagination, a radically secular literature may have a profoundly fruitful religious function to perform. For, by the very resoluteness with which it may plunge us into the Dark, it may precipitate us out of our forgetfulness, so that, in a way, our deprivation of the Transcendent may itself bring us into fresh proximity to its Mystery.

-Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Negative Capability

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Creation's Very Self: On the Personal Element in Recent American Poetry

Behind the poem is the human being . . .

—Richard Lewis

Categories and classifications are among the dehumanizing evils of our time. Almost anywhere we turn in these bleak, disordered days of recent history there lies in wait one kind of mechanism or other which has as its end the obscuration or destruction of what is unique and particular, unmistakably itself: the very identity of a person, an experience, an object. Since nothing keeps alive our awareness of the concrete and specific more than poetry, it is the worst sort of folly to force it into convenient patterns or to make it demonstrate some invented principle. Such efforts are nets to catch the wind, a wind which has sacred sources because it is the Muse's or the spirit's motion, or, following Charles Olson's definition of the poetic line, because it is "the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes." In spite of every attempt to do something with or to it, as W. H. Auden says in his elegy for Yeats, poetry "survives,/A way of happening, a mouth." And so it should be. The few distinctions and delineations that I make in the following pages are loose, not rigid, and are designed for the exigencies of the occasion. My purpose here will be neither that of the scholar nor the theorist, but, if you will, that of the enthusiastcommentator who wishes to bring to attention some contemporary poets and their poems, to remark on certain qualities that seem

^{1.} Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Human Universe and Other Essays*, ed. Donald M. Allen (New York, 1967), p. 54.

prominent and characteristic, and to disappear, leaving the reader, I hope, with a desire to know recent poetry better.

One distinction I do think necessary to draw before we can discuss current writing separates modernist poetry from contemporary poetry. I shall presume that the modernist poets are those whose names spring first to mind when we think of poetry in English in this century, the great pioneer figures such as Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, W. C. Williams, and Marianne Moore, most of them born a decade or more before the turn of the century and all but a few now dead. These modernists have in common the fact that each of them, in his or her own way, participated in the poetic revolution which cast aside the vestiges of Victorianism and outworn literary conventions, infused new vigor into diction and rhythm, disclosed new possibilities of form, and brought poetry into meaningful relationship with the actualities of modern life-a relationship which is being renewed by poets today. Having accomplished all this, the modernist poets proceeded into the years of their maturity and produced some of their finest work long after that revolutionary movement of what Randall Jarrell once aptly called "irregularly cooperative experimentalism" was over. So, in a period ostensibly belonging to their successors, those poets who are the first of the ones I shall call contemporaries, we find extraordinary achievements such as Eliot's Four Quartets, Pound's later Cantos, Williams's Paterson, and Stevens's The Auroras of Autumn looming intimidatingly over the poetic landscape.

What separates the contemporaries from the modernists, to begin with, is the simple fact of being born too late to join in that radical movement which, beginning around 1910, overthrew reigning literary modes and aesthetic tastes, and, with increasing help from literary critics, itself solidified into an establishment. Not only did these younger poets emerge in the wake of a full-scale artistic revolution, whose chief participants were still alive and still quite productive, but they were also confronted with fresh versions of the

^{2.} Randall Jarrell, "The End of the Line," in *Literary Opinion in America*, ed. M. D. Zabel (New York, 1951), p. 747.

literary past and a variety of prospects for using it which Eliot's notion of tradition, the practice of his poetry, and an expanding body of literary criticism made available. The liberating influence of William Carlos Williams was yet to be felt.

So it was that Stanley Kunitz, Richard Eberhart, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Karl Shapiro, Randall Jarrell, and others who began to write in the 1930's had to seek their own voices, searching them out through the arduous process of trying on and discarding models, guides, and influences from the poetic tradition and from modernist writers alike, without the benefit of any shared aesthetic principle or revolutionary artistic purpose. They did have in common a dogged attentiveness to the inner necessities of imaginative vision and to the difficult struggle for style. In this situation there were both burdens and blessings. If these poets, and many others who followed them in the late 1940's and the 1950's, felt overshadowed by most of their elders and confined by what Donald Hall terms a critical "orthodoxy" which required "a poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony, and wit," they were freed as individuals from the demands created by literary movements to an energetic and single-minded concentration on the making of poems, a concentration that brought, in due time, Roethke in The Lost Son, Lowell in Life Studies, Berryman in Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and The Dream Songs, and Shapiro in The Bourgeois Poet, for example, to the kind of poetic breakthrough James Dickey calls "The Second Birth"-an intense imaginative liberation, achieved at great personal cost, in which the poet, like a snake shedding his dead skin, frees himself of the weight of imposed styles and current critical criteria to come into the place of his own authentic speech. The secret of this renewal, Dickey observes, "does not, of course, reside in a complete originality, which does not and could not exist. It dwells, rather, in the development of the personality, with its unique weight of experience and memory, as a writing instrument, and in the ability to give literary influence a new dimension which has the quality of this

^{3.} Contemporary American Poetry, ed. Donald Hall (Baltimore, 1962), p. 17.

personality as informing principle. The Second Birth is largely a matter of self-criticism and endless experiment, presided over by an unwavering effort to ascertain what is most satisfying to the poet's self as it develops, or as it remains more clearly what it has always been."⁴

It is precisely here, with Dickey's notion of the poet's personality "as informing principle," that I want to note an important difference between the critical views derived from the modernist movement and the practice of many contemporaries—a difference which has been heightened in the last decade and a half by the appearance of the Beat poets, the Projectivists, the confessional poets, the socalled New York School, and what is often called a new Surrealism or poetry of the unconscious. I have used in my chapter title the term "personal element," which is purposely more general than Dickey's "personality," so it might apply equally to the work of a number of poets who have differing aims and emphases. But both terms oppose the view handed down from Eliot and the New Criticism that poetry and the emotions it conveys are, or should be, impersonal, and that an author's personality and life ought to be excluded from his writings. In many of their poems Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and others stress the poet's anonymity by employing fictional masks, invented speakers or personae, thus enforcing a division between writer and work. The original motive for such objectivity seems genuine enough: to rid poetry of biographical excesses and the residue of the Romantics' preoccupation with personality which had seduced attention from the true object of interest, the poem itself. In his famous 1917 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot declares, "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates"; and again he says, "The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."5 While it cannot be gone into here, much of what Eliot says has great value and will continue to speak to later generations.

^{4.} James Dickey, The Suspect in Poetry (Madison, Minn., 1964), pp. 55-56.