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M. L. ROSENTHAL

The Modern Poets



A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION



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Foreword

Not only poets but critics, teachers, editors, and many others have long been concerned about the formidable but quite unnecessary barriers between poetry and the general reader. One of my aims is to provide a catalyst to help break down those barriers. Without offering an exhaustive survey of *all* the modern poets and poetic currents, I have tried to plot a view that will suggest the range of our poetic landscape and its relation to that crisis of personality the modern mind has had to face for more than a century.

The book therefore begins with some comment on the resistance to rapport between poet and reader, on the character of the poetic sensibility revealed to us by the moderns, and on the many and varied continuities between poetry of the past and that of our own time. It then turns to the great germinative figures of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot—all of them extremely sensitive to the rôle of tradition—and to other important figures among the older moderns. It concludes with chapters on the prophetic, visionary, and rhetorical writing of Lawrence, Crane, and the 'thirties and on the poetry that has risen to the fore in the past two decades, from Dylan Thomas on. Needless to say, I have had to make painful omissions in order to keep to my main purpose. If the Muse takes notice, I pray her pardon.

There are genuine poets everywhere—sparkling, energetic spirits of every variety—and very few of them receive anything like public recognition. As poetry editor of a national magazine I have met and corresponded with hundreds of these 'unknown' figures who

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have, often, written beautiful, interesting work. They create a subjective expression of contemporary life in its individual meanings, a vital flow constantly reshaping the realities of the world into human, aesthetic dimensions. Some of them, such excellent poets as Ramon Guthrie, the late Dilys Laing, Theodore Weiss, and Ben Belitt, are familiar to the smaller community of their fellow-poets and other people aware of the current state of the art, if not to the largest audience. (We have unfortunately but a few groups like the one at Dartmouth in which poets can read and show their work to each other and receive criticism of the most practical kind, and in which the encouragement of beginners by masters and the candor of peers can be expected.) Most poets, though, are known to a few people only—an established poet who has encouraged them, an editor or two, a teacher, a few other writers in similar circumstances. And many lack even this limited kind of relationship. Yet without these 'unknowns' we could have no great poetry; they are the living matrix within which that poetry is actually written.

M. L. ROSENTHAL

Suffern, N. Y.

July 1960

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THE MODERN POETS



For my mother

ONE

Poetry Past and Present

1. THE WIDENING OF SENSIBILITY

Quite different from the comfortable assurances drifting down from public rostrums and from publicity offices are the exacting demands of our poets. What are we to do with Hamlet's elegiac mockery as he fingers Yorick's skull, or with the brutality of William Carlos Williams in his poem 'Death'?

he's dead
the old bastard—
He's a bastard because

there's nothing
legitimate in him any
more

he's dead . . .

Even professional critics and poets know the dismay that unfamiliar poetry can arouse at first hearing: another call to the abyss, another reordering of life, of the intelligence. An unexpected widening of sympathies and of sensibility threatens to release our dark, subversive, inward self; we fear engulfment by all that we protect ourselves from feeling too intensely. Yet a nagging desire to experience just such a widening persists; we long to face the mysterious depths of self for which the poet speaks with the evasive frankness of our own deepest thoughts. The poet, by bringing the problems of life into his aesthetic orbit, transforms them and reveals far more about our whole contemporary meaning than we ever thought possible.

Of course whatever is perceived with freshness and immediacy, with all the senses alert, seems disturbing, 'unorthodox,' although prevailing manners and systems are inevitably but approximations

of situations already obsolete. The liveliest minds will always dance among discrepancies, ironies, possibilities, truths and pretensions, life and death. Probably a gap is unavoidable at any given time between what the poets are saying and doing and what the common reader imagines they say and do. Too, the reader's refusal to allow a poem to come close enough may account for his casual rejection of it. The 'obscurity' we hear so much about is generally not obscurity at all, is not anything in the poem itself. What makes a poem seem difficult is usually a matter of perspective. Some quite comprehensible but unexpected shift of manner or thought, like those life confronts us with daily, may be the key.

Curiously the most marked stylistic break between past and present in poetry is not, as is commonly assumed, a break from forthrightness to riddle-making. It is from relative formality to simplicity and directness; an unpretentious intimacy, an awareness of everyday life, has been brought into poetry more emphatically than before. In fact Jules Laforgue commented on this development as early as 1885.* In his notes on Charles Baudelaire, he observed that his fellow countryman and poet was 'the first to write about himself in a moderate confessional manner and to leave off the inspired manner.' 'The first to speak of Paris from the point of view of her daily damned (the lighted gas jets flickering with the wind of prostitution, the restaurants and their air vents . . .)' and to 'accuse himself rather than appear triumphant,' Baudelaire 'shows his wounds, his laziness, his bored uselessness at the heart of this dedicated, workaday century.' He brings to literature 'the boredom implicit in sensuality,' the consciousness of 'neurosis,' the feeling of 'damnation on this earth.'

Although Laforgue's comments apply almost as well to Catullus and other poets who can hardly be called 'modern' he points out something particularly contemporary in Baudelaire's attitude: the suddenly morbid awareness of an individual life out of tune with the proclaimed ideals of its age, and paradoxically, the sense of being but one of the doomed many interned in megalopolis. The

* *Selected Writings of Jules Laforgue*, ed. and trans. William Jay Smith, Grove Press, New York, 1956, p. 211.

law of life becomes that of a living mass death; understandably, one of the crucial symbols of modern poetry, in English at least, becomes Dante's pictured prisoners in the antechamber of Hell, 'wretches never born and never dead,' worthy of neither blame nor praise. These are the citizens of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, who, lacking all moral perspective, mechanical in their motions, are trapped by their bodily selves and are incapable of meaningful commitment either to good or to evil. The modern city is their habitat:

Unreal city,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many . . .

Thus writes Eliot, echoing both Dante's *Inferno*, III, and Baudelaire's 'Les Sept Vieillards': '*Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,/ Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant.*' (Swarming city, city filled with dreams, where spectres in full daylight confront the passerby.) The changes in poetic attitude so apparent in these lines have affected virtually all our poetry. That the general reader has so little realized this, that his resistance to 'modern' poetry continues, is no doubt a measure of the continuing vitality and shock-value of the Baudelairean vision. The work that this book considers is not in fact modern innovation, but grows out of a modern tradition.

The most powerful impulses in our poetry still derive from the later William Butler Yeats, from Ezra Pound, and from Eliot. This is grounded in part on their relation to tradition and on their aesthetic achievements, in part on the character of their cultural criticism. Knowing them, we understand D. H. Lawrence better, and Hart Crane, and the revolutionary voyages of the 'thirties. We find more comprehensible the continuing absorption with translation and with certain mystical, Classical, Provençal, and Symbolistic motifs. This continuity is apparent in values, in craftsmanship, in symbolic statement, in psychological insight. Nor is that gaiety lost which informs the older poets—Williams dancing

naked before his mirror celebrating the knowledge of his own isolation, Wallace Stevens making jokes about death, Eliot perceiving the crudely comic—or the absolute, unblinking honesty behind it.

The cultivation of a special kind of subjectivity too has been continuous. Thresholds of candor, even of morbidity are crossed so that the multiple meanings of experience may be explored. The Romantics and Whitman, and then Yeats and Lawrence, prepared us for the sexual immediacies of Dylan Thomas and Robert Lowell. Life's 'normal' associations are distorted, dissolved in nightmarish terror in Howard Nemerov's brilliant sequence 'The Scales of the Eyes' as in Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night.' The 'Rhapsody' is a perfect embodiment of the new-old tradition. As the protagonist here moves through the city streets everything is twisted and distorted, 'held in a lunar synthesis.' The moon herself, queen of this night realm, is not the chaste goddess Artemis but a witless old whore who 'winks a feeble eye.'

The moon has lost her memory.
 A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
 Her hand twists a paper rose,
 That smells of dust and eau de cologne. . . .
 The reminiscence comes
 Of sunless dry geraniums
 And dust in crevices,
 Smells of chestnuts in the streets,
 And female smells in shuttered rooms,
 And cigarettes in corridors
 And cocktail smells in bars.

It is she who whispers the incantations that dissolve 'the floors of memory' and 'of all its clear relations,' its 'divisions and precisions.' Under her crazed spell, in her light and that of the street lamps, the world is seen as foul, death-ridden. A witch—in the figure of a filth-bedraggled prostitute—leers from a doorway, which opens on her obscenely, 'like a grin.' The motif of sexuality reduced to horror and sterility is carried through the poem, some-

times only by suggestion, sometimes openly and powerfully. It is somehow associated with the pictures of rusty springs in factory yards and dead branches cast up on the shore, and with a series of terrible, silent, greedily snatching movements that emphasize the automatic depravity, as it were, of animal nature: a cat devouring a bit of rancid butter in the street, a child's hand grabbing and pocketing a toy, a crab gripping the end of a stick.

We may, if we wish, call this a sick vision of life. But we cannot ignore the possibility, and it is this possibility the poem explores, that the nighttime world may be the real world. It is the world of day that, in this experiment of the imagination, is illusory—the world in which things make sense, in which one can make plans, strike heroic and moral attitudes, speak in 'the inspired manner,' in which the memory can teach and guide. Night blots out illusion and selects for intenser focus the images of the vilest reality only. Hence the bitter irony of the poem's conclusion:

The lamp said,
 'Four o'clock,
 Here is the number on the door.
 Memory!
 You have the key,
 The little lamp spreads a ring on the stair.
 Mount.
 The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall,
 Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life.'

The last twist of the knife.

'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' speaks for only one strain in Eliot's work as in modern poetry generally. But it is an important strain and has led to the occasional complaint that our poetry is merely negative, alienated, and 'pessimistic.' Poetry can be affirmative even when it cuts painfully into the bone so as to affirm the marrow. Moreover, poetic affirmation, even at its simplest, as in most of Longfellow, may have *some* of the sadness and mystery of the more difficult moderns: 'I heard the trailing garments of the Night/ Sweep through her marble halls!'

According to René Char, the poet is a person of 'unilateral stability'; * that is, he makes something unique by transmuting general ideas and commonplace reality into aspects of himself. In the process his artistic sensibility moves into the foreground and becomes the determining element; it is this creative alchemy, I think, which makes poetic speech normative—something that at once reveals the terrible silent poverty of most lives and the vast richness which is ours for the asking, and thus suggests an ideal. Who would not wish to be able to communicate love and its heightenings of sense-alertness as Richard Wilbur does in 'The Beautiful Changes'?

One wading a Fall meadow finds on all sides
 The Queen Anne's Lace lying like lilies
 On water; it glides
 So from the walker, it turns
 Dry grass to a lake, as the slightest shade of you
 Valleys my mind in fabulous blue Lucernes.

As we have seen with 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night,' there is a darker function of the poet's awareness in the absolutely candid recognition of things as they are. Thus Williams's lines on death, quoted a little earlier, or these of Eberhart's:

I saw on the slant hill a putrid lamb,
 Propped with daisies. The sleep looked deep,
 The face nudged in the green pillow
 But the guts were out for the crows to eat.
 ('For a Lamb')

Again, such candor is not new in poetry of this age. What is new is its insistence on the 'morbid' themes, not in scattered pieces only but in great quantity, by many writers. 'I always thought of ——,' a poet wrote to me, 'as our rosy-cheeked boy, the lover of life, who could make allowances for all human troubles and really mean it. But I've been reading his latest book and can see,

* René Char, *Hypnos Waking*, ed. Jackson Matthews, Random House, New York, 1956, p. 59.

in poem after poem, the maggot behind that cherubic smile.
Death on every page!

Death on every page, though often it is the death (and rebirth) of our civilization that is the real obsession. In modern poetry, we are more and more presented with the need to counteract the apparent suicide, or at least the self-betrayal, of a culture. 'The pure products of America,' writes Dr. Williams, 'go crazy.'

No one
to witness
and adjust, no one to drive the car
(*'To Elsie'*)

The prevailing modern poetic assumption is that, in submitting to organization, institutionalization, and mechanization for their own sake we are in danger of losing touch with the springs of joy and vitality: delight of the senses, tradition and ritual, self-realization within a truly human context. Randall Jarrell's 'A Girl in a Library' shows a typical 'Home Ec.' or 'Phys. Ed.' major asleep in a college reading room. His satire is tempered by compassion for her as an innocent victim of her times who might at least, in another age, have been one of the anonymous 'braided maidens singing as they spin.' The poem concludes with an affirmation of the girl's 'real' or archetypal meaning, as opposed to what the civilization would make of her:

. . . and I have seen
Firm, fixed forever in your closing eyes,
The Corn King beckoning to his Spring Queen.

Our poetry since the 'twenties might almost be described as a concerted effort to re-establish vital continuities with whatever in the past is myth-making, wonder-contemplating, and strength-giving, and to discover widened, fresher meanings. From *The Waste Land* to Muriel Rukeyser's *Elegies*, from Pound's 'The Return' to Crane's self-analyses, the spectacular psychological struggle for such continuity and cultural breakthrough made for a richly varied yet unified literature. At his best the modern poet,

whether he descants on apeneck Sweeney or on the revolutionists stopping for a glass of orangeade or on 'the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea,' has with Democritus and Shakespeare the gifts of laughter and of faith in human possibility.

2. SOME WORKINGS OF TRADITION

Just as our first acquaintance with poetry goes back to the buried impressions of infancy and to the songs and games of childhood, so the art itself summons up its whole history in every poem. It brings the two kinds of memory, historical and private, into single focus. Past and present illuminate each other—one might almost say they shape each other—as if a single Author outside Time were at work. The history of poetry is alive in any poet's work as much as are the echoing rhythms and melodies from his own early years.

The presence of the personal past may be easier to see. It is no trick, for example, to recognize Yeats's deliberate reversion, at the end of 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' to a childlike diction and rhyme—almost doggerel—to express the innocent ecstasy into which the poem flames:

When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

It is more difficult to observe the way in which the imagination of Yeats's forerunners has entered the lifeblood of this poem. In the climactic stanza preceding this one, the poet has affirmed the preciousness of life in the teeth of the worst it has to offer:

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men;