

# A Few Reflections on Poetry and Language

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In "When was Modernism?"—which appeared in *New Left Review* in 1989—Raymond Williams defined what modernism is by asking when it was. As a classification for a whole cultural movement and moment, "modernism"—Williams pointed out—did not appear until the 1950s; until then, the meaning of "modern" in literature was roughly the same as "contemporary." Modernism is, therefore, a critical construct; modernist writers "are applauded for their denaturalizing of language, their break with the allegedly prior view that language is either a clear, transparent glass or a mirror, and for their making abruptly apparent in the texture of narrative the problematic status of the author and his authority." As the author appears in the text, the "self-reflexive text assumes the centre of the public and aesthetic stage, and in doing so declaratively repudiates the fixed forms."

Or, as Peter Burger writes in an essay, "Aporias of Modern Aesthetics"—published in *New Left Review* a year after "When was Modernism"—after modernism "art is itself dragged into the process of alienation that separates subject and object." In the context of a crisis first imagined by Nietzsche, the romantic writer's belief in the self's power to shape reality through language, and the realist's sense of language as an accurate expression of factitious reality, are shattered. Modernist writing—as Charles Taylor observes in *Sources of the Self*—turns more inward, tending to explore, even to celebrate, subjectivity, exploring new recesses of

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feeling, entering the stream of consciousness, spawning, schools of art rightly called expressionist, while, at the same time, decentering the subject, displacing the center of interest onto language, or on to poetic transmutation itself, or even dissolving the self as usually conceived in favor of some new constellation. The paradox, aesthetically, is this: Although the subject is dissolved into the text's language—into the formal process itself, onto a new and separate aesthetic plane—modernism does not eliminate subjectivity.

In "Subjective Authenticity"—a 1976 interview with Hans Kaufman—Christa Wolf remarked that the "reservoir writers draw on in their writing is experience, which mediates between objective reality and the authorial subject." Quoting Anna Seghers, who said that the writer "is the curious crossing point where object becomes subject and turns back into object," Wolf continues in a passage worth quoting at length:

To my mind it is much more useful to look at writing, not as an end product, but as a process which continuously runs alongside life, helping to shape and interpret it: writing can be seen as a way of being more intensely involved in the world, as the concentration and focusing of thought, word and deed. This mode of writing is not 'subjectivist,' but 'interventionist.' It does require subjectivity, and a subject who is prepared to undergo unrelenting exposure—that is easy to say, of course, but I really do mean as unrelenting as possible—to the material at hand, to accept the burden of the tensions that inexorably arise, and to be curious about the changes that both material and the author undergo. The new reality you see is different from the one you saw before. Suddenly, everything is interconnected and fluid. Things formerly taken as 'given' start to dissolve, revealing the reified social relations they contain and no longer that hierarchically arranged social cosmos in which the human particle travels along the paths pre-ordained by sociology or ideology, or deviates from them. It becomes more and more difficult to say 'I,' and yet at the same time often imperative to do so. I can only hope I have made it clear that this method not only does not dispute the existence of objective reality, but is precisely an attempt to engage with 'objective reality' in a productive manner.

II

Theories of language appear throughout modernist poetics. As Sigurd Burckhardt noted in his still worth reading 1956 essay "The Poet as Fool and Priest, the 'first purpose of poetic language is the very opposite of making language more transparent.' If a language pure enough to transmit human experience without

distortion existed, there would be no need for poetry. Not only does such a language not exist, it cannot; language, by its very nature, is a social instrument, and must be a convention, arbitrarily ordering the chaos of experiences, denying expression to some, allowing it to others. Language must provide common denominators, and so it necessarily falsifies. These falsifications are more dangerous the more transparent language becomes—the more unquestioningly it is accepted as an undistorting medium. Language itself—as Michael Hamburger puts it in his 1969 critical magnum opus, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s*—“guarantees that no poetry will be totally ‘dehumanized,’ regardless whether a poet attempts to project pure inwardness outwards or to lose and find himself in animals, plants and inanimate things.” Words never can be totally severed from the ideas and meanings that exist in external reality. One needn’t be a Marxist to recognize that all poetry has political, social and moral implications, regardless whether the intention behind it is didactic and “activist” or not.

Poets—always the most astute theoreticians and critics of their art—recognized the complicated refraction of the self in a poem by the early 1920s. Poetry, William Carlos Williams writes in 1923 in *Spring and All*, expresses “new form dealt with as a reality in itself...with the dynamization of emotion into a separate form.” Take, for example, from Marianne Moore’s *Observations*, published in 1924,

#### WHEN I BUY PICTURES

or what is closer to the truth,  
when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor,  
I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments:  
the satire upon curiosity in which no more is discernible  
than the intensity of the mood;  
or quite the opposite—the old thing, the mediaeval decorated hat-box,  
in which there are hounds with waists diminishing like the waist of the  
hour-glass,  
and deer and birds and seated people;  
it may be no more than a square of parquetry; the literal biography  
perhaps,  
in letters standing well apart upon a parchment-like expanse;  
an artichoke in six varieties of blue; the snipe-legged hieroglyphic in three  
parts;  
the silver fence protracting Adam’s grave, or Michael taking Adam by the  
wrist.

Too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that detracts from one’s enjoyment.

It must not wish to disarm anything; nor may the approved triumph easily be honoured—

that which is great because something else is small.

It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,

it must be “lit with piercing glances into the life of things”;

it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.

Note how Moore immediately decenters the poem’s self. The simple opening declaration, “When I buy pictures,” is transformed into a more complicated statement, “when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor,” which the self sees as “closer to the truth.” This long, dense line—thickened by the accentuated jostling of its opening nine monosyllables—enmeshes the “I” in its language. It also relocates the “I” outside the self, in an aesthetic realm. Then, in a long and complicated sentence—syntactically refracted by closures demarcated by a colon, a dash, and a series of semicolons—the “I” is fixed (in the sense of adjusted?) to the imagined object. The effect is to make the self doubly removed from the actual act of buying, in a kind of perceptual reality that is no more “than the intensity of the mood” or (continuing the process of decentering) “quite the opposite—the old thing,” which is first described, and then shifted back through layers of meaning into subjectivity, “literal biography perhaps.” At this point, the reader already has felt the poem as an imaginary object; the poem has assumed the center of attention and aesthetic focus, beyond “Too stern an intellectual quality.” The imagined object—the picture turned into the poem—“must not wish to disarm anything.” A poem includes wishes; it must be human; it cannot escape social or economic realities (those subtextually suggested by buying pictures, purchasing imagined enjoyment); it cannot (“perhaps”) escape “literal biography.” The poem in which the self chooses to imagine buying a picture “of whatever sort” has its own necessity. It must see “into the life of things,” yet must also “acknowledge” (a word connoting objectivity) its subjectivity, “the spiritual forces” which (both separate and part of it) make the poem what it must be. “Moore”—William Carlos Williams wrote in an essay on her work in 1925—“undertakes in her work to separate the poetry from the subject entirely—like all the moderns. In this she has been rarely successful and this is important. There is no compromise. Moore never falls from the place inhabited by poems. It is hard to give an illustration of this from her work because it is everywhere.”

In part XXII of "The Man with the Blue Guitar"—written during the Great Depression (in 1935 or 1936), quite purposely with the title of the Pablo Picasso painting—Wallace Stevens writes: "Poetry is the subject of the poem, / From this the poem issues..." Or—to restate Stevens—every poem reflects what the poet believes poetry is; every poem composes its own poetics.

Stevens was the first American poet to make the issues of a poem his explicit subject. A poet's critical sense of a poem, of poetry, is reflected in the issues of the poet's poems. "The subject matter of poetry is not that 'collection of solid, static objects extended in space'"—Stevens writes several years later, in his 1941 essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (written after completing his book of poems, *Parts of a World*)—"but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes."

## IV

One issue of poetry is a poem's existence as an object. As Octavio Paz writes in his essay, "Jose Ortega y Gasset: The Why and the Wherefore" (translated by Michael Schmidt): "The poem is a verbal object, and though it is made of signs (words), its ultimate reality unfolds beyond those signs: it is the presentation of a form." Paz echoes what Eugenio Montale, in "Let's Talk About Hermeticism"—translated by Jonathan Galassi—wrote: That a poem is a "poetic-painterly-musical production," that "the tendency" of a poem, "among all the infinite variations" is toward the object, toward art invested, incarnated in the means of expression, toward emotion which has become thing. "Understand here," Montale adds, "that by thing we don't mean the external metaphor, the description, but simply the resistance of the word within its syntactical nexus, the objective finished... sense of form sui generis, to be judged case by case."

On Wednesday, March 21, 2006, in "Dispatches: Journals," a Poetry Foundation website and blog, Jonathan Galassi updates the issue. "I'm afraid"—Galassi writes—"I'm unavoidably wedded to the notion that a poem is a made thing that aims to be an autonomous object—a thing, with a life of its own... I guess I'm the learn-by-doing-type—poetics to me seem mainly *ex post facto*, derived from what one has already made out of what one has felt." On Thursday, March 23 2006, Galassi writes: "I keep obsessing about my sense of a poem as a made thing—feeling kneaded and shaped into ideas, or is it conditioned by ideas, pressed through the mold of mental forms to become an autonomous object that somehow recapitulates the process? Or should we think of the poem as the process itself, the

conversion of perception or emotion into ... something? And how are those conversions determined by the history of the mind that's performing the transmutation—by what it's read and done before?... But what is poetry that isn't tied to a tradition, which is, after all what a language is?" On Friday, March 24, 2006—concluding his week of blogging—Galassi notes: "I went to see a performance of Mark Morris's company last week which included his version of the Gertrude Stein/Virgil Thompson opera, *FOUR SAINTS IN THREE ACTS*. I was captivated again, as I always am, by the magic of Stein's words: 'pigeons on the grass, alas,' etc. Is she not the original 'language' poet? She unpacks syntax and expected meaning so constantly and surprisingly, with beautiful, witty, moving results" but "always works in reaction to expectation."

Terry Eagleton addresses the issue of the autonomy of the poem in a 1989 interview, "Action in the Present," in *Polygraph: Versions of the Present: Modernism / Postmodernism*. "There is a sense," Eagleton says, "that style in writing resists commodification, in a world where it is part of the effect of the commodity to desensitize.... I think we have to find a way to resist that form of commodification in the letter of the text... a way of resisting commodification by sensuousness, by a kind of... overlaying of the language."

## V

The issue of how language is used in a poem creates, of course, further issues. In *A Novellette*, written in the late twenties, William Carlos Williams writes: "Conversation as design"; conversation expressed in a written text—Williams continues—is "actual to the extent that it would be pure design... of which there is none in novels." Fifteen years or so later, T.S. Eliot, in "The Music of Poetry," writes: "It may be strange, that when I profess to be talking about the 'music' of poetry, I put such emphasis upon conversation... While poetry attempts to convey something beyond what can be conveyed in prose rhythms, it remains, all the same, one person talking to another."

How does a poet converse in a poem? By "voices," Eliot says, in 1953, in "The Three Voices of Poetry." "The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody." "The second," according to Eliot, "is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.... I

think"—Eliot concludes—"that in every poem, from the private meditation to the epic or the drama, there is more than one voice to be heard."

What is conveyed within the composition (or design) of a poem's voices beyond what can be conveyed in prose? Still the best answer to the question is Ezra Pound's declaration in 1934, in *ABC of Reading*: "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree'... I begin with poetry"—Pound writes—"because it is the most concentrated form of verbal expression."

Or—to restate Pound—poetry is all that language is, expressed in its most compressed, concentrated forms.

## VI

The issue of a poem's language also creates issues of who the speaking (or conversing) self in a poem is. Michael Hamburger, in *The Truth of Poetry's* "A Period Loose at All Ends" chapter, observes that in Eugenio Montale's poetry "private and public experiences are interwoven into the texture" of the poems "exactly as they are interwoven in the texture of human life." Montale's "poetic 'I' functions as a medium rather than as a subject (in either sense of the word)"; the poet "belongs to his poems, and his poems belong to any reader prepared to entrust himself to their exploratory courses." "The first person in a lyrical poem should never be identified, in any case, with the poet's empirical self," Hamburger writes in the *The Truth of Poetry's* "Masks" chapter, discussing Yeats's poetry. Yeats, Hamburger says, "demands to be read with the kind of adjustments that we make for dramatic poetry... Whether primarily confessional or primarily dramatic, the first person in lyrical poetry serves to convey a gesture, not to document identity or establish biographical facts." Yeats's "multiple selves ... convey a great many different gestures, of a great many different orders."

In a 1982 review in *Stand of Bertolt Brecht's Poems 1913-1956*, Terry Eagleton writes that Brecht's aesthetic objective "was to float language free of the object so that it became, not its mirror, but its critique." Language for Brecht was not a 'reflection' or 'symbolic embodiment' of reality, but a "historical intervention, shattering established representations in the name of alternative ways of constructing the world. The paradigm of such reconstructions for Brecht was"—Eagleton continues—"of course socialism, but there is a sense in which it was also writing. For any piece of writing constructs reality in partial, questionable, exclusive ways... The most revolutionary gesture for Brecht was... for a poem to demonstrate its

own bias, backtrack skeptically on its own assumptions, interrogate its own perceptions in the very act of communicating them. "The political force of Brecht's poetry, therefore, "is not in the first place a question of 'passionate commitment,' moral indignation or satiric denunciation though few modern poets have equalled him in these capacities," but, instead, "a matter of dramatizing, in the very forms of fiction, that the social reality under which we live in merely one possibility, a particular 'fictional' construction which may be transformed. This"—Eagleton summarizes—"is indeed a question of form rather than (in the first place) of content, and it is for this reason that formalism must be opposed: it trivialises an issue of supreme importance."

Adrienne Rich, in the epigraph of her book *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2006*, presents the issue simply like this: "Poetry is not self-expression, the I is a dramatic I," she writes, quoting Michael S. Harper, who quotes Sterling A. Brown.

## VII

In the October 4, 2007 *Guardian*, John Freeman writes an article entitled "Verse-slinging." Freeman begins with an anecdote about stopping by "a Greenwich Village bookstore recently" where, on the store's front table, "a handsome batik-print covered paperback," *Contemporary American Poetry*, selected and introduced by Donald Hall, caught his eye. As he looked through what he thought looked like "a dignified little book," the bookseller—in a tone of voice Freeman describes "as if I were picking up a bullet casing"—interjected, "Oh, the old poetry anthology wars... Now that was fun to watch from the sidelines."

"I hadn't stumbled on an old gunslinger, or a man drenched in nostalgia—just a bookseller with a long memory," Freeman continues. "During the 1950s and early 60s, what the Beats didn't accomplish in coffee houses and on City Lights Press, anthologists hammered home in the pages of pocket-sized books that sold for a dollar. They feel today like field manuals, complete with marshalling introductions. 'For thirty years'—Freeman quotes from Hall's introduction to *Contemporary American Poetry*—"an old orthodoxy ruled American poetry." American poetry, Hall wrote, has been "derived from the orthodoxy of T.S. Eliot and the New Critics," who "asked for a poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony, and wit. The last few years have broken the control of this orthodoxy."

Freeman doesn't elaborate how the control of the orthodoxy that Hall

mentions—which, in part, was what the post World-War Two “wars” over American poetry were about (“wars” that absorbed the critical attention of poets writing during the late fifties and sixties, even through to the end of the century)—was critically broken. Instead, he simply observes that “It’s hard to imagine this sentence being written today. It’s not,” Freeman says, “that there isn’t an orthodoxy,” but “rather that there are too many of them. There are lyric poets and language poets, slam poets and funny poets. There are poets who identify by ethnicity, gender, and sex,” and—even among these—“many who could claim the mantle of such identity politics and refuse. But mostly, it should be said, there’s a lot of poetry... No longer do Americans have to read a prevailing kind of poetry, or even within their own borders.”

Yet, Freeman asks, “in this mishmash” has something gotten lost? “What is a poem, anymore? Let alone a good one, or even a beautiful one? Who sets this taste? These,” Freeman adds, “are not idle questions.” In “an environment where poetry is as marginalised as it’s ever been....despite the volume of stuff that’s being produced,” how do we “figure out what is good, and why it should matter,” and then, how, do we “make those judgments heard?” when, today, “the taste-making power of anthologies has been replaced by MFA programs” and “a staggering proliferation of prizes.”

## VIII

So, what is a poem, anymore (in an environment in which poetry is as marginalized as ever, and this marginalization is discussed and analyzed by poets far more than the critical issues of the art itself)? The self-reflective text that assume the center of the public and aesthetic stage... new form dealt with as a reality in itself... the most concentrated form of verbal expression, of composed vocal conversation... the notion of a made thing that aims to be an autonomous object, a thing with a life of its own, in which a life is lived in, in which a voice or voices function as a medium or as media, rather than as subjects: “Poetry is the subject of the poem, / From this the poem issues...” The issues of a poem—a poem’s issues—are what a poem is.

In “Defying Conclusions: Opening Up Modernism,” the final chapter of his 1995 book *Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures and Limits*, Ranier Emig writes: “In order to fulfill itself, modernist poetry must keep a precarious balance. It must pursue modernity’s tendency... of transforming reality into an aesthetic construct. Yet it must not give in to a complete aestheticisation of reality, to the idea of

its own omnipotence in the allure of its simulated reality... Self-reflection is the key term in modernist poetry’s delicate balancing act. It must of necessity constitute itself and even strive to achieve an impossible unity. This is, as Adorno reminds us, “the inheritance of myth as an attempt to master the chaos of nature.”