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INTRODUCTION

21ST CENTURY MODERNISM (BLACKWELL MANIFESTOS)

--I would be happy to say that the two Steins [Gertrude and Wittgen-] are the Adam'n' Eve of Language poetry. Or De Man, Derrida, and Dylan; Ashbery, Cage, and Picasso; or Walter Abish and Apollinaire. Maybe it's all about Benjamin and Roussel. But really it's Husserl and Beckett, or maybe Jabès and Zukofsky; maybe whoever first inverted 'No ideas but in things!' or invented the term L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Connecting a whirl of historical dots into a certain shape is like overlaying a constellation on a bunch of stars in the heavens. . . .

Joshua Clover, 'The Rose of the Name' Fence 1
(Spring 1998)

This witty genealogy by a young American poet has it exactly right: Language poetry, together with its related 'experimental' or 'innovative' or 'oppositional' or 'alternative' poetics in the U.S. and other Anglophone nations, has often been linked to the two Steins—Gertrude Stein and Wittgenstein (as I myself have argued in Wittgenstein's Ladder), to Guillaume Apollinaire and William Carlos Williams, the Objectivists and New York poets, Samuel Beckett, the Frankfurt School, and French poststructuralist theory. But further: it is interesting that Clover pays no lip service to the tired dichotomy that has governed our discussion of twentieth-century poetics for much too long—that between modernism and postmodernism. Indeed, in the year 2001, the latter term seems to have largely lost its momentum. How long, after all, can a discourse—in this case, poetry-- continue to be considered post-, with its implications of belatedness, diminution, and entropy?

In this respect, we are now a long way from 1960, when Donald Allen published his ground-breaking anthology The New American Poetry. For Allen and his poets, especially the Charles Olson of 'Projective Verse', modernism was finished. As James E. B. Breslin put it in his classic study From Modern to Contemporary (1984), 'In the ten years following the Second World War, literary modernism like an aging evangelical religion, had rigidified into orthodoxy'. The 'end of the line', for Breslin, was represented by such 'New Critical' poets as Karl Shapiro and Delmore Schwartz, Richard Wilbur and Hayden Carruth. Fortunately, so this narrative would have it, by the late fifties, the 'hermetically sealed space of the autonomous symbolist poem' was giving way to the radical 'new energies' of Black Mountain and San Francisco, the New York poets and the Beats -- 'The Postmoderns' as Allen called them in the title of his revised edition of the New American Poetry (1982). With their 'open-form', 'authentic', process-oriented, improvisatory, colloquial, vernacular poetry, the New American Poets positioned themselves against the conservatism, formalism, and suspect politics of modernism, from Eliot (the American transplanted to Britain) and Auden (the Englishman transplanted to the U.S.) to Randall Jarrell and the Robert Lowell of Lord Weary's Castle (1947).

Allen's anthology introduced the literary public to some of the most exciting poets coming of age in the late fifties: Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka (then LeRoy Jones) and Jack Spicer. Compared to the 'closed verse' poets featured in the rival anthology, Donald Hall's New Poets of England and America (1957), the 'New Americans' were indeed a breath of fresh air. But from the hindsight of the twenty-first century, their fabled 'opening of the field' was less revolution than restoration: a carrying-on, in somewhat diluted form, of the avant-garde project that had been at the very heart of early modernism. Indeed, what strikes us when we reread the poetries of the early century, is that the real fate of first-stage modernism was one of deferral, its radical and Utopian aspirations being cut off by the catastrophe, first of the Great War, and then of the series of crises produced by the two great totalitarianisms that dominated the first half of the century and culminated in World War II and the subsequent Cold War.

We often forget just how short-lived the avant-garde phase of modernism really was. In textbooks and university courses, as in museum classifications and architectural surveys, 'modernism' is a catch-all term that refers to the literature

and art produced up to the war years of the 1940s. The Reina Sophia in Madrid, for example, is the national Museum of Modern Art but its collection, largely from the Fascist 1930s, has little in common with avant-garde attempts to transform the very nature of the art work. On the contrary, such self-declared avant-gardists as Robert Delaunay or Futurists as Giacomo Balla and Carlo Carra are here represented as conventional realists, producing landscapes, still-lives, and cautious portraits in muted colors. The same phenomenon occurs, of course, in the former Soviet Union, but it also occurs, if less dramatically, in American poetry. A poet like Delmore Schwartz, I shall suggest in my final chapter, may have thought of himself as the heir of Eliot, but between the initiatory force of Eliot's 'awful daring of a moment's surrender' and Schwartz's 'Eliotic' style, something pivotal has given way. Indeed between the two world wars (and well beyond the second one), it almost seems as if poems and art works made a conscious effort to repress the technological and formal inventions of modernism at its origins.

Now that the long twentieth century is finally behind us, perhaps we can begin to see this embryonic phase with new eyes. Far from being irrelevant and obsolete, the aesthetic of early modernism has provided the seeds of the materialist poetic which is increasingly our own-- a poetic that seems much more attuned to the readymades, the 'delays' in glass and verbal enigmas of Marcel Duchamp, to the non-generic, non-representational texts of Gertrude Stein, and to the sound and visual poems, the poem-manifestos and artist's books of Velimir Khlebnikov than to the authenticity model—the 'true voice of feeling' or 'natural speech' paradigm—so dominant in the sixties and seventies. Indeed, as I shall want to suggest in Chapter 1, the 'artifice of absorption' (Charles Bernstein's term) of language poetry has less in common with Allen Ginsberg's 'First thought, best thought' paradigm or even with Frank O'Hara's brilliant and witty 'Lucky Pierre' Personism, than with the early poetic experiments of that seemingly most august High Modernist, T. S. Eliot. For the Eliot of 1911, who composed 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'Portrait of a Lady', was probably the first poet writing in English who understood Flaubert's radical doctrine of the mot juste and the Mallarmean precept that poetry is 'language charged with meaning'—a language as intense and multi-vocal as possible—a precept picked up some eighty years later by poets as diverse as the Harryette Mullen of Muse and Drudge and the Karen MacCormack of Quirks and Quillets.

Those who denigrate Language poetry and related avant-garde practices invariably claim that these are aberrations from the true lyric impulse as it has

come down from the Romantics to such figures as the most recent Poet Laureates— Rita Dove, Robert Pinsky and Stanley Kunitz. But laureate poetry—intimate, anecdotal, and broadly accessible as it must be in order to attract what is posited by its proponents as a potential reading audience-- has evidently failed to kindle any real excitement on the part of the public and so decline-and-fall stories have set in with a vengeance. Great poets, we read again and again, are a thing of the past: a 'post-humanist' era has no room for their elitist and difficult practices. Accordingly, the main reviewing media from the Times Literary Supplement to the New York Times Book Review now give 'poetry' (of whatever stripe) extremely short shrift.

But what if, despite the predominance of a tepid and unambitious Establishment poetry, there were a powerful avant-garde that takes up, once again, the experimentation of the early twentieth-century? This is the subject of the present study. Designed as a manifesto, it makes some of the polemic claims we associate with that short form even as it suffers from its inevitable omissions. Because I am here interested in foundational poetic changes, I shall have little to say about many of the poets who have been most important to me and whom I have written about again and again over the years—Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens, Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars, George Oppen and Lorine Niedecker, David Antin and John Cage, John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. Again, because of space constraints, I have not discussed contemporary poets outside North America. Indeed, the inclusion in the last chapter of a mere handful of contemporary poets—Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Steve McCaffery—provides no more than a prolegomenon to what I take to be the enormous strength of this second wave of modernism. From A to W --from Bruce Andrews and Rae Armantrout to Rosemarie Waldrop and Mac Wellman (with our Z poet, Louis Zukofsky, occupying a central link between the first wave and the second), there are dozens of important poets in the U.S. and many more in the UK, Ireland, and Australia, in Europe and Latin America, that belong here and that I have either written about or plan to. Here, however, my attention is devoted to four early modernists (or call them avant-gardists) whose specific inventions have changed the course of poetry as we now know it : Eliot, Stein, Duchamp, and Khlebnikov.

I do not want to imply that modernism, as here presented, is somehow normative, that it is superior to earlier—as to what will be later—poetic movements. Obviously—and study after study has argued the case—there is large-scale

continuity between modernism and the Romantic tradition; many of the features I shall be discussing, for that matter, could just as easily be found in the poetry of George Herbert as in that of Eliot or Pound. But what interests me is the unfulfilled promise of the modernist (as of the classical) poetic impulse in so much of what passes for poetry today—a poetry singularly unambitious in its attitude to the materiality of the text, to what Khlebnikov described as the recognition that ‘the roots of words are only phantoms behind which stand the strings of the alphabet.’ It is this particular legacy of early modernism that the new poetics has sought to recover.

‘To imagine a language,’ said Wittgenstein, ‘is to imagine a form of life.’ This book studies such key poetic ‘imaginings’ both at the beginning of the twentieth century and at the millennium, so as to discover how their respective ‘forms of life’ both converge and cross.