
Poetry Now and The Space We Live In

Samuel Hux

*York College
The City University of New York*

Not many poets of recent years have been able to handle Ezra Pound's heady imperative—"Make it new!" It is too easy to be overcome by the ranting energy of the *Cantos* and ignore the fact that the "it" even when made "new" by Pound so often seemed very old—something anciently Greek, Chinese, Anglo-Saxon, Provençale—and the fact that the best things in the *Cantos* are frankly Biblical. "Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down. / Learn of the green world what can be thy place / in scaled invention or true artistry, / Pull down thy vanity"

Perhaps this injunction, rather than the more famous one, might better be heeded. For there is a certain vanity and impatience with scaled invention characteristic of the poet who thinks he achieves true artistry by "making it new" in the simple-minded application of the phrase: *liberated from the classy stiltedness of the past, free to walk his own feet and the metronome be damned, and speak his own speech, just like in the real world, y' know*. An approximation of moral virtue seems to accrue to an "underground" even when it is safely above ground and dominant. Its members *have a healthy respect for idiosyncrasy, they go their own ways*—although one might suspect (I do suspect) that one is witnessing, in Harold Rosenberg's wonderful phrase, a "herd of independent minds."

Literary historians know the independent minds had a leader, a hero with a cause, to whom they made actual or figurative pilgrimage, to "Paterson, New Jersey." One has to admire William Carlos

*Influence of
William
Carlos
Williams.*

Williams for his dedication to his art. I confess I admire his art itself much less—although one may wish to put that down to doddering taste. I believe Williams when he talks about the “variable foot” (as opposed to metrical regularity, that straw bugaboo), although I do not hear it dancing in his poetry—and I know that I do want dancing instead of walking. Or put my resistance down to my belief that his poetry, as a proclaimed attempt to give the natural outlines and depths of quotidian life their deserved due, is a manifest (and manifested) failure, the stuff of a poet consumed by his theories and obscuring the world’s richness when he most closely adheres to them. But it is not so much Williams the poet as Williams the inspirer of a few poets and a lot of poetasters who concerns me here. For I admire his impact on American poetry even less than I admire his poetic practice.

“A poem almost at random.” Karl Shapiro (in his admirably entitled *In Defense of Ignorance*, 1960) made a really remarkable statement in praise of Williams’ style: “it is a workable style, one that permits him to write a poem almost at random.” If this *could* refer to a poet finding *his* proper voice, well and good. But what happens, because of the enormous, intended, and cultivated influence of Williams, is that . . . it is a workable style that permits *one* to write a poem almost at random.

Williams once said to an interviewer, “Forcing twentieth-century America into a sonnet—gosh, how I hate sonnets—is like putting a crab into a square box. You’ve got to cut his legs off to make him fit. When you get through you don’t have a crab anymore.” I make no brief for sonnets as such—although, gosh, how I love them. But I suspect that when one resorts to the use of force, and then amputation, it may be because of a want of skill. But in any case I recognize how welcome Williams’ metaphor must be to some.

Hundreds of inspired poetasters, liberated from those constraints of traditional (however modified) forms that demanded a certain minimum of actual talent, discover their own “unique” forms by learning what Shapiro called with approval “the secret” of Williams’ form: eradicating the lines between poetry and prose and art and life. No matter that the first is a seductive gyp, a final solution to the oldest critical question, and the second a lie.

The history of poetry is punctuated by—indeed to some degree may *be*—the search for more cogent and naturalistic rhythms and a more convincingly ordinary vocabulary. But the historical evolution toward the naturalistic and ordinary was always countered and

controlled by standards of admitted artifice, and *out of the tension between the two came the real and profound music—or dancing*. But make the standards of artifice (with some other name, of course) equal to, no more than, the same as, or even comfortably close to the habits of ordinary speech, and there is no music because no tension—and no profundity specifically poetic. At the best, one could say that the music arises from the tension between the reader’s ancient expectations conditioned by centuries of verse and what he actually hears in the herd’s prosy screed. But in that best case the poet needs, ironically, precisely that reader whose “old-fashioned” tastes he tends to dismiss as no longer relevant to provide what he no longer provides. Amidst such creative passivity and dependence, what is poetry? The thing which is not there? I enjoy being a reader—but only when the poet is working as hard as I. When he isn’t, and depends upon his any workable utterance to justify itself by the simple fact of being workably uttered, then I recommend Pound: “Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.” (While I wish that Pound had.)

No tension,
no “music”
or “dancing.”

Richard Wilbur, who never made the pilgrimage to Paterson, once wrote that a certain respectful *obliqueness* is necessary for one to transmute the things of this world into art, that no one makes a “genuine act of creation” without a “feeling of inadequacy.” I appreciate the confession, or the faith, of a genuine poet.

The faith of a
genuine poet.

That “obliqueness” is another name for a form which is beyond the autonomous self-satisfaction with one’s own voice. For that is what the celebration of ordinary speech is; make no mistake of it. The “poet” is saying: Whenever I speak it’s poetry, or at least pretty damned close to it, with a mere adjustment here and there advised, maybe.

This is an enormous sea-change in the oldest verbal art, more than a matter of just another stylistic innovation. Poets, or enough of them, have always been egotistical of course; Blake and Yeats and Frost leap to mind before that clause is completed. One can think of little poetry that is not in first person singular whether actually grammatically so or not. The poet may have been an egotist, but the poetry itself was also something other than himself. Poetry was not entirely *his*. It had its own resistant necessities. In some sense he had to carve a poem, as if the language were marble. “So I rise up early / To erect my rhyme,” the poet in the Icelandic *Egil’s Saga* has it; “I pile the praise-stones, / The poem rises.” Poetry was a kind of labor, was a sinewy architecture. But, now: it is a workable style allowing

Poetry more
than the poet.

one to write a poem almost at random. Insofar as the poetry of ordinary speech, of direct un- or barely-mediated utterance, is a *form*, then the form of poetry, like some poets themselves, has become egotistical. Have you read any, say, John Ashberry lately?

I think I know how some Christians feel about some liturgical changes and those translations of the Bible to make the language “more relevant for today’s world.” I probably have no right to complain about the tin-eared revision of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, not having been inside Henry VIII’s house of God since 1957, but I can imagine the complaints of those parishioners who miss the Elizabethan-Jacobean cathedral tones. Let me imagine the argument of some resistant Christian:

Pandering to passivity.

“I am told the changes are for clarification’s sake, availability of meaning. But is there anyone who’ll sit in these pews for whom the meaning isn’t already clear in broad outline and necessary specifics? Instruct me by sermon in crackerjack language if you like. But I don’t come here just to be instructed, but to worship; and I’m not convinced God appreciates our talking to him as if he were an insurance agent. I am told that these changes are to halt the exit and encourage the entrance of old and prospective communicants who just don’t feel as I do. Well, this may sound somewhat prideful, but Should the church try to serve the cold and the lukewarm by denying the needs of the faithful? Should those who love the beauty of the service in its appropriate *different-ness*, as generations have, be told that they must sacrifice for the sake of those others who are to be pampered in their insensitivity to the beauty? Sacrifice may be in some cases a Christian virtue, but look!—something dishonest is going on here. For even if you succeed in increasing the enrollment, the thing they’re enrolled in is now fundamentally changed so that the experience of being in here is not fundamentally different from being outside. Maybe the nature of God doesn’t change, but the nature of worship does; it is no longer elevation of oneself and hard work; it is easy non-extension of oneself, passivity, self-satisfaction, *real* pride.”

Now, as an analogy this is not perfect. But it has some virtues. The literary world is not a church, and poetry is not a liturgy. Reading poetry is not worship. With the new Book of Common Prayer the old may be thrown out, while on the other hand the dominance of the poetry of ordinary speech does not mean you cannot read Anthony Hecht. Nonetheless—. The poet is saying to the traditional

reader of poetry that he, surely, can be counted on to read in any case, while there are so many other potential readers that might be reached if certain innovations (read “compromises”) are made. And the language the new audience will hear at the poetry reading is not fundamentally different from what it would hear if it stayed away. And finally, even if the literary world is not a church nor poems hymns, and even if all the other analogies are similarly flawed, something else is being changed, altered, dissipated, something that is to my mind a great deal more vast than a church—so that one might stand, I should think, with some hesitation and humility and at the very least ask, “Have I really the right to do this thing?”

Imagine a society whose arts had no really distinguishing characteristics. You attend a ballet to see people walk exactly as you do. You attend a concert to hear horns imitating taxi cabs and strings suggesting screeching tires, and indeed you are amused, for a while, by the familiarity. You attend a poetry reading and hear, let us say, “What’s for dinner, dear?”—something you are equally capable of inventing. You go to a museum and find the paintings replaced by exceptionally good mirrors. Now, for a while this might serve a purpose: let us see and hear ourselves anew. But after that brief while something else has happened which is really rather hard to get right. For, you see, I am not talking about a four-day experiment in concert halls and galleries; I am trying to imagine the standard condition of “a society whose arts had no really distinguishing characteristics.” Would you say that society had a “Culture”?

*Glorification
of the ordinary
as lack of
Culture.*

I would not, I rush to say. I mean my negative first of all as a sort of intuitive response, not stopping to define terms too closely just yet. But now, a philosophical digression, if I may beg patience.

Consider a theme little considered now. A sort of “noble doubt” of the absolute thereness of the world of phenomena, a skepticism at least, is—evidently—justified; or so a great deal of our philosophic tradition would have it. Many, perhaps most, would think that great deal greatly misguided—including perhaps most of the present philosophical profession. But one needs here a balance between seriously-considering and not-taking-matters-too-literally. On the one hand, one does not wish to worry oneself crazy with uncertainties about the stability of things, or run oneself ragged dashing periodically into the woods to insure by one’s glance that the trees remain there. But this tends toward the too literal. I doubt that any philosophical Idealist will fear to sit down: he knows that even if the

*“Noble doubt”
of thereness.*

chair is in some mysterious way a product of human faculties, a mere appearance, it will be there unless a prankster has removed it. On the other hand, no matter how much George Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge* moves one to befuddled irritation, no matter how readily one would kick a stone with Dr. Johnson in refutation, there is something "noble" about the doubt. That is not to say that an absolute certainty that all is as it appears to be, and is *here* in assured materiality, is ignoble; but this certainty is, well, a mental habit of taking too much for granted with little appreciation of dark subtleties, a practice in the sanguine. And it is a habit marked by a deficiency of wonder. One needs here a certain sympathetic respect for those burdened with wonder.

The limitations of Pragmatism.

We tend to think the more Positivist thinkers have their heads screwed on while some others are simply screwy. But Berkeley, for instance, while not sure that a stone was what we would think a stone, hard and resistant whether we see and touch it or not, wished to insure its ultimate thereness by thinking it a thought of God; and that is not a screwy enterprise for a bishop. When Immanuel Kant taught that we can perceive as far as the phenomenal world (the realm of appearances) but, given the limitations of our perceiving faculties, cannot know the *noumena* that exist beyond, and that we cannot be sure that our faculties do not alter even the phenomena perceived—was that not a dizzying discipline for such an extraordinarily ambitious metaphysician? We like the word *empirical*—so down to earth. But since for the Empiricists like John Locke or David Hume knowledge comes through the senses and the senses can only sense phenomena, the Empiricists—as they knew—had no privileged certainty of a reality supporting the apparent world. And *pragmatic*—even more down to earth. But there is a curious problem in Pragmatism that worried William James. If "truth" means a correspondence with what is (the real structure of the world), which is not dependent on the human mind, then what has happened when one subscribes to the Pragmatist definition of a true fact: something that has passed successfully a process of practical verification? Was that something not a true fact *until* verified by a test set by a human mind? Is this a verbal quibble, or has one leapt like a quantum into that strange world of quantum mechanics, where in some sense the stuff of matter is born in the physicist's act of observation?

In some sense. I could say that of so much of the above; it is very vague. But I do not wish to (and cannot) teach a lesson in metaphys-

ics and epistemology. I am after the *wonder* that the metaphysicians must have felt. That wonder interests me more here than the subtle and manifold differences between the philosophers curious enough to debate the issue in that long heroic age of philosophy until recent modernity. Those other philosophers who tell me not to worry, that the question is pointless, may be right. But their world is—how should one say it?—less wonder-full. Wonder is alien to the sanguine. You can wonder at something apparently certain (feel surprise or amazement); you can wonder *if* (feel doubt). But even surprise or amazement implies at least a second's doubt: otherwise, why be amazed? Wonder and doubt cannot exist isolated from one another. And when one has the courage to wonder-doubt about such a monumental *what* as all-there-is, there is an intellectual nobility there.

*Wonder
presupposes
"noble doubt."*

What I am talking about is *creation*, that marvelously rich ambiguous word. It contains the classical philosophic duality of subject and object, the "two worlds": that of our devising and that which precedes and outlasts us. Creation: the phenomenal world we inherit, the place we live in; creation: what we create, including Culture, the space we live in. The advantage of considering the matter from the perspective of the noble doubt is, quite simply, perhaps polemically, that it dramatizes the *urgency* of the enterprise of creation. All that doubting, all the insisting, all that wonder—it is the creation of Culture, that urgent matter.

The insistent capital C is meant to distinguish it from such usages as "the culture of the corporate boardroom," "the culture of poverty," "the culture of narcissism," all those instances when the word is used as short-hand for "predictable modes of localized behavior and prescribed ranges of expectation" or somesuch. And, moreover, to distinguish it from that degenerate usage of the word to signify "society"; Culture is not the mere collection of *us*. Culture, rather, is an almost tangible web of art, speculative thought, historical recollections, cogent language, choreographies, symphonic patterns—all created by human beings who thought that something horrible would happen, something dangerous to the human species and his habitation, if such were not made or thought. All of that the practical man thinks of as mere ornamentation or occasional escape, but it is instead, in Kenneth Burke's phrase, "equipment for living." Well . . . more than equipment.

*Culture
"equipment
for living"—
and more.*

We live not only in a world of geographic location and social re-

lations, but in a kind of mental space as well that has an almost “physical” resistance about it. Culture is a thick medium through which minds move synaptically to meet other minds and become stronger and more resonant through the tension generated and energy required in the journey. Of course it is easy to exaggerate a metaphor, and I do not want to harden mine into concrete. Nevertheless, it is as something quasi-physical and resistant that I think of Culture. When I think of it as something that *is*, I think of it as a rich, textured space in which we live, the richness contesting and defining our motions, almost like the physicists’ dream of the ether. When I think of it as something we *do*, I think of it as a thickening of experience.

Pop culture dilutes Culture.

Now of course some do not care to make the journey through the medium at all. So be it. But it ill behooves a “poet” to think he is a poet when he does not contribute to that resistant medium, when he would in effect dilute it instead. If the poet of the dominant mode today contributes to any “culture,” it is to pop culture. One of the characteristics of pop culture is that it creates no resistant medium. Another is that it requires no sense of inadequacy before creation; one might say it provides workable styles which permit one to make a piece almost at random.

Dominant poets as entertainers with pretensions.

Now, the problem is not simply that one poet’s implicit disclaimers of inadequacy are offensive to me and that I prefer the other who stands with some humility before creation. You may hear in my tone a private need; but I would not dare to rest my argument on a private need, insist that a given poet sing me a song I like. Rather, I think the one is failing the vocation of poetry—or is, perhaps, avoiding a job he knows he cannot do. I use the word *vocation* half in the antique sense of “a summons or strong inclination,” a calling, knowing that some will answer a call they have no call to. The poet of the dominant mode is no more than a comfortable entertainer with some advertised pretensions to seriousness, rather like the stand-up comedian who thinks of himself as a “satirist” and likes to give disquisitions on the nature of comedy *engagée* to interviewers in search of high-toned copy.

Rainer Maria Rilke observed a world where “Transience plunges into a deep being.”

Nature, the things we move among and use, are provisional and perishable Because of its temporariness, which it shares with us, we ought to grasp and transform these phenomena and things

in a most loving understanding. Transform? Yes; for our task is so deeply and so passionately to impress upon ourselves this provisional and perishable earth, that its essential being will arise again “invisibly” in us. *We are the bees of the invisible* Animated things, things experienced by us, *and that know us*, are on the decline and cannot be replaced any more. *We are perhaps the last still to have known such things*. On us rests the responsibility of upholding not only the memory of *them* (that would be little and unreliable), but their human and laral worth. (“Laral” in the sense of household gods.)

“These phenomena and things” that Rilke felt were being lost were not uncommonly mysterious dark druidical forests and misty teutonic valleys and such, but the common things: house, well, cloak, grapevine—or what was being lost, rather, was an appreciation of their “laral” value. Any generation may feel that things and attitudes of value are being lost through progress, technology; and Rilke means that in part. But only in part, for there is a native fragility independent of the moment: “Transience plunges into a deep being.” There’s an urgency often found in Rilke’s poetry that stands considering. It seems to me more than merely fanciful, more than a moment’s trivial delight, when Rilke thinks of the dancer as the “transposition of all transience into motion” (*Verlegung / alles Vergehens in Gang*), as one whose “whirl at the close” of the dance (*der Wirbel am Schluss*) is a “tree [created] out of movement” (*Baum aus Bewegung*).

The world’s transience, its mutability: how durable these themes in poetry! They may be the mode through which the (noble) poet perceives, intuits, or fears the questionableness of phenomena, the way he expresses the noble doubt. (The positivist Rudolph Carnap used to dismiss metaphysics as poetry—in a way he was right.) And the “dancing” may be the way the poet tries to preserve the world, as it were. I think that something of this naiveté, or sophistication, I am not sure which—this *urgency* at any rate—is part of the stuff of the genuine creative urge.

But I have to fall back here upon the logic of *in some sense*. I have to in part because I cannot be sure that when William Butler Yeats observed a dancer—“How can we tell the dancer from the dance?”—or Emily Dickinson wrote “a certain Slant of light / Winter Afternoons,” or John Clare “The grass below—above the vaulted sky”—I cannot be sure that they actively, consciously thought they were involved in a co-operative endeavor with the familiar world to sustain the familiar world. I cannot be sure they would not have

kicked along with Samuel Johnson. And I have to fall back on the logic of *in some sense* in part because I am not at all sure that *I* can understand (even if I can at unpredictable moments) the noble doubt—except as some broad metaphor.

Poetry as
expression of
epistemologi-
cal caring.

Ultimately, it seems to me, the noble doubt, however differently expressed, is a fine if extreme metaphor suggesting the knowledge, the surmise, or the fear that without our wondering notice—without a kind of epistemological *caring!*—there is something dull and sodden about the world of phenomena. Of all the literary arts—more so than fictional narrative with its native focus on relations human to human—poetry has (had?) in its unique disciplined, strategically indirect ways carried on a kind of ritual dialogue with the familiar world. So to suggest that the world might “disappear” is not to suggest that it might literally vanish (nuclear catastrophe not considered here) so that one (left floating somewhere for the sake of argument and point of observation) would be staring at-through weightless-colorless transparency. It is “only” to say that the world might become (as for some it has become, as Rilke feared) stale mass, sodden isness, dead matter—humans and things—that one can only engineer upon. It would not then be at all likely that one would see any “angels” in the laundry as in a Wilbur poem, “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World”:

Some are in bedsheets, some are in blouses,
Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.
Now they are rising together in calm swells
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear
With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

Now they are flying in place, conveying
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving
And staying like white water; and now of a sudden
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet
That nobody seems to be there. . . .

Merely, preciously, mystical? Not at all. As a matter of fact: profoundly *materialist*.

I suppose that any time you write about art you are in part composing a confession, and of more than taste. Some occasional half-articulate mutterings aside, residues of youth, I am not a religious person except in the broadest sense: the “numinous” and such I like

to contemplate. And I do not think the earth a god's extension of his substance (or even in Berkeleyan fashion his thoughts) or the heavens his abode. So I do not really think there are any angels in the wash, or any *lares* in the walls. But I think it very important to be able to *say* there are. This is not a matter of bad faith. It is a matter of imagination in service of *respect for the material of life*.

Doubtless the secularization of society is a positive thing. At least I know I do not want to live in anything approaching a theocracy. But the total secularization of the world? For "secular" need not imply merely the disestablishment of the ecclesiastical: it can imply the absence of the mysterious, the magical, the wonder-demanding non-cashable suggestive in the most quotidian aspects of life—laundry, even. *The poet has traditionally been one who stood in the way of the secularizing of the world's body, the mere engineering of it, so to speak. His chosen job was to know that the richness of the world does not respond to barked commands, that it reveals something of itself only after respectful entreaties, oblique strategies (as any quantum physicist knows!), charms so to say.* This required a certain formal indirection, a "use of language . . . deliberately and ostentatiously different from talk," as W.H. Auden said when characterizing poetry as a "rite."

Poet roadblock to secularization.

Now it might be objected that this is a very expensive metaphor I am working. And who need buy it? And that it is too exclusive. Surely poetry has traditionally done other things besides the quasi-metaphysical labor of carrying on a ritual dialogue with Creation. Indeed. I agree. I only wish to suggest with one extensive example that poetry was a *serious* enterprise. I do not think the dominant mode of our poetry today is such an enterprise. Poetry could do its other things as well only by virtue of being a *different* kind and use of language, even "ostentatiously" so, as Auden put it.

One is a fool to stand in the road of literary-linguistic history and shout "Stop!" The language will change, inevitably; and so, therefore, must poetry. The poet-critic Josephine Miles has charted how over several centuries the value-laden words of poetry have changed from the abstract *goodness, truth, and beauty*, to the still abstract but rather more political *liberty and freedom*, to the more concrete or natural *waters, rivers, rain, trees, and stones*, to in our time, as we've moved indoors, so to speak, *road, street, house, room, walls, windows, glass*. Or, I might add, *laundry*. All true. As an example she quotes Robert Hayden's "Those Wintry Sundays," a recollection by the poet of his father, some representative lines of which I present.

When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

But what makes the poem work is not the *rooms* and *house* and *shoes*, surely; but instead *the chronic angers of that house* and the apparent artlessness of *what did I know* preceding *of love's austere and lonely offices*—none of this being garden-variety rhythm or diction, with *offices* of course not “offices” at all. So we are talking about quite different things. And Hayden's poem is itself a quite different thing from, say, Ashberry's “The Instruction Manual,” whose first two lines are typical of the seventy-two that follow: “As I sit looking out of a window of the building / I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.” I also wish it.

Of course there are things the poetry of ordinary speech can do. (There are things anything can do.) Primarily, through its quick and easy familiarity, even its private obscurity, it can suggest to us the great ego-stuffing falsehood that we are all, deep down where it really counts, poets—so what is all this about Dylan Thomas' “labour,” his “craft or sullen art/ Exercised in the still night”? But what it cannot do—because its makers are focused so proudly on their own “natural” voices, liberated in herd from the metronome and other such oppressions, and encouraging the reader, who has a voice like that, as everyone has, to stay at home content with himself—what it cannot do is contribute to Culture, that space with a marvelously rich lingua franca inaccessible to egotistical monolinguists.