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978-0-521-33085-5 - Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism

Charles Altieri

Excerpt

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## Introduction

From the Modernism you choose you get the PostModernism  
you deserve.

David Antin

An old academic joke provides the best emblem for the historical and thematic concerns that will dominate this book. The story's ephebe is a graduate student whom we join as he knocks on the door of his illustrious professor. To the professor's somber "What can I do for you?" he replies, "I would like a letter of recommendation." This engenders a minute of solemn staring, followed by the professor's resolute, "I will give you a letter of description."

By suffering such rejections, our hero becomes an exemplary Modernist, or at least an exemplar of one significant version of Modernism, suffering the burdens both of the artists and of their critics. He confronts, in its apparently innocuous social form, the fundamental conflict generated by the increasing reliance of Western culture on empiricist criteria of judgment for all questions about value. Before rude awakenings like these, writers and critics had not imagined such insuperable gaps between description and recommendation, even though conflicts between the two had become apparent. But now there appear a variety of inescapable and irreducible contradictions, whose structural form our little tale makes evident. For there is perhaps no more bizarre way of attempting to correlate public and personal models of valuation. Clearly, the letter must have a sufficient degree of objectivity to allow others to make reasonable inferences about the candidate's probable success within his chosen profession. Otherwise the author loses credibility, and the student is likely to find himself in a situation he cannot handle. But where this degree of personal investment is at stake, conditions of objectivity are at best tenuously negotiable. The student wants disinterested external judgment, but not too disinterested; certainly not judgment impervious to the charms that seem to sanction his sense of being special, even

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though there may be little that actually distinguishes him. The ego seems to think that description and recommendation are much more compatible than our professor does – and it is precisely that hope for confirmation that keeps the ego dependent on the professor’s authority. Although that authority claims to be based on an objective methodology, it is as dependent on the need for recommendation as the student is, differing primarily in the degree to which those in power can conceal their vulnerability. A moment’s reflection shows that the professor’s proclaimed commitment to description in fact denies what counts as objectivity within the practice of recommendation. Almost no one treats academic letters of recommendation as descriptions. Rather, they are elaborate codes that convey a good deal of information, provided that one reads them for what they encode. In this practice, “pure description” is not at all pure; it is a code that can be used to give a very negative recommendation. The professor can simultaneously ignore that fact and rely upon it, because his sense of self-importance is congruent with the dominant social criteria that grant him the role of arbiter.

The more closely we examine the situation, the more disturbing it becomes. Both the subject and his judge desire third-person standards, desire a sense of a transparent social order and clear evaluative structures, yet both also have intense first-person needs that make them want to bend or distort the conventional practices. Recommendation seems dependent on description, but also incompatible with it, so that the “I” is tempted to protect its investments by withdrawing from any possible public measure. The only difference between judge and judged may be the manner in which each engages in this withdrawal, the ephebe retreating into self-protective timidity or global irony, and the professor into a hardened insistence on methodologically secure impersonality. Neither strategy works very well: The student clearly loses the opportunity of self-assertion that he desires, and the professor’s assertion leaves him susceptible to devastating demystification. Suppose someone were to attempt a careful description of what went into the professor’s principles: The odds are good that she would find out how few recommendations students and colleagues have given him during the past few years, how bleak the future seems for him, and how thoroughly he worked to protect himself from those realities. Once a culture turns description on its authorized judges, it finds that apparently simple decisions reveal exposed vulnerabilities, which threaten to undermine the very principles claiming to have purified themselves of precisely those human excesses.

Perhaps all complex cultures suffer from some version of this problem. Some, though, manage or conceal it better than others. Modern culture is not so blessed. The set of values formed in the West over the

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past two hundred years may be especially vulnerable to public and private rhetorics of crisis, because its fundamental intellectual energy is bound up in fundamental contradictions. On the one hand, its high valuation of the self results in a commitment to radical subjectivity that cannot be subsumed under any general category; on the other, its ideal of intellectual judgment requires it to treat all human actions as if they were subject to exhaustive third-person descriptions, which necessarily undermine the status of self-reflexive individuality.

These abstract issues have concrete consequences. Imagine the student's shame and sense of impotence. Imagine, too, his profound self-disgust, both because he did not know he was so vulnerable and because he allowed himself to expose that vulnerability to this professor, this audience figure so concerned with marshaling his own powers that he would be unlikely to make an accurate recommendation, even if he were able to appreciate what the ephebe offers. Nothing so completely binds self-disgust with a desperate sense of vulnerability as this subjecting of the psyche's most intimate first-person needs to a third-person scrutiny whose demystifying force the first person had not anticipated. Finally, imagine the profound alienation that begins as a defensive gesture against the professor's authority, only to deepen in intensity and clarity as one realizes how shaky that authority is and how irrationally assertive it must become, because of its instability. Then one is in a position to understand the shame, the rage, the wild hopes, and the consequent sense of powerlessness that permeated the arts at the moment in our culture when the tension between the performative and the descriptive seemed most intense and inescapable, in both the private and the public domains.

I do not think it necessary to document the role of Modernist American poetry in defining this sense of cultural crisis. We have the obvious examples of Ezra Pound's *Mauberley*, T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock*, William Carlos Williams's uneasy self-defensiveness, and the eloquence of Wallace Stevens's *Crispin*:

These bland excursions into time to come,  
 Related in romance to backward flights,  
 However prodigal, however proud,  
 Contained in their afflatus the reproach  
 That first drove *Crispin* to his wandering.  
 He could not be content with counterfeit,  
 With masquerade of thought, with hapless words  
 That must belie the racking masquerade . . .

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Hence it was  
 Preferring text to gloss, he humbly served  
 Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event,  
 A clown perhaps, but an aspiring clown.  
 (*Collected Poem 39*)<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the poets' early work did such a good job of portraying the conditions evoked by my parable that criticism has shaped its own languages accordingly.<sup>2</sup> We have inherited the poetics of "recommendations lost," and hence we see the poetry primarily as the range of defensive strategies necessary to ennoble the dispossession that the professor's world has inflicted on the arts. That language, however, seems to me a terrible reduction of the versions of human agency that the poets created for their culture and bequeathed to ours. Therefore, although I shall spend some time spelling out the historical terms of the crisis of recommendation, I shall concentrate on using that framework to define, by contrast, what the aspiring clowns eventually made of the alienated self-reflection to which they were driven. Frustrated by the culture's standards for recommendation, they sought alternative models of agency in the study of literary history, in the new ways of looking at the psyche being developed in their own time, and in the countercultural gestures elaborated by the visual arts. (Postmodernist writing was to turn, for its response to the professor, away from models of agency to strategies that might undercut his authority by making visible the contradictions suppressed by his postures.) All of those resources would then make it possible to project modes of lyric energy capable of bypassing the entire structure of mimetic values sustaining the professor's claims. An art opposed to representational principles could present itself as directly exemplifying certain performative dimensions of spirit.<sup>3</sup> So rather than rely on prevailing cultural values, the poets had plausible "objective" claims to be shaping a new, ideal culture, which could afford individuals both different principles for representing their desires or powers and a different kind of community that might be capable of assessing their commitments.

For a useful introduction to those projects we need to look no farther than the concluding lines of Stevens's "Academic Discourse at Havana":

All this is older than the oldest hymn,  
 Has no more meaning than tomorrow's bread.  
 But let the poet on his balcony  
 Speak and the sleepers in their sleep shall move,  
 Waken, and watch the moonlight on their floors.  
 This may be benediction, sepulcher,

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And epitaph. It may, however, be  
 An incantation that the moon defines  
 By mere example, opulently clear.  
 And the old casino likewise may define  
 An infinite incantation of our selves  
 In the grand decadence of the perished swans.

(*Collected Poems* 144–5)

This is still fairly early Stevens, so we are dealing with ideas that had not yet been incorporated into the self-reflexive formal strategies elaborated in his later work. Yet the specific imaginative situation here is particularly apposite to this discussion, because it shows the poet confronting the same issues facing critics of his work today: How can one identify with imaginative energies from the past so that the principles of recommendation that they once offered do not now appear only “benediction, sepulcher, and epitaph”? For Stevens, this question entailed confronting the limitations of the Romantic lyric stance as it tried to engage a world in which traditional symbolic and social values had collapsed, leaving only the pathos of repetition to replace the dominant myth of progress. He realized that from an analytic, third-person perspective, the Romantic dream of personal expressive power now seemed little more than a monument to our own insufficiency. But, the poem suggests, another way of engaging those energies emerges if we can find imagistic equivalents for the evocative residue haunting us in our sense of loss, if only because we too must stage our own dispossession before historical change. Thus, in “Academic Discourse,” the moon also speaks, but through an incantational process trying to embody the same affective states that the Romantics sought without the openings to irony inescapable in the personal lyric mode. And, more important, this incantation creates the possibility of a second, more capacious, “infinite incantation of ourselves,” which takes the art well beyond any simple imagism. Once the image displaces the Romantic subject, it opens the way for a new model of agency, and a new economy for the imagination’s emotional investments. Stevens can shift from the moon to the casino, from a natural figure to a figure that invokes a social world and returns us to the internal pattern of figuration that literally constitutes Stevens’s own poetic incantation.

Now the poet’s terms for addressing an audience have changed. Rather than exalted lyric speech, the poem requires another kind of eloquence, more closely tied to the quasi-ritual energies composing the incantations. These energies do not require celebrating the person of the poet. There need be no dream of heightened sensitivity or prophetic insight to tempt the poet to the kind of postures whose afflatus first drove Crispin to his wandering. The processes composed within the text itself must serve as

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sanction and testimony – not because the work provides a separate formal reality, but because its role as incantation invites its audience to participate self-reflexively in the version of human agency that the poem makes available. Such incantations are “infinite” – ultimately unbounded by history – because this site so links words and worlds, in its play of subjective and objective genitives, that no model of finite relations can account for the resulting product. Just as the physical scene is absorbed into the site of incantation, the energies seeking expression fuse with the objective construct to offer possible selves for those readers for whom the poem projects needs and desires that they can take as their own. The eloquence of song both elicits and defines selves, teasing out expressive needs and producing an imaginative state that various selves can enter because the expression ceases to belong to any one producer.

I shall have this entire book to establish the context of historical pressures and resources behind these experiments and to show, with the necessary distinctions and qualifications, how those principles can play significant roles in contemporary culture, either as direct sources of imaginative energies or as challenges to our own pieties. But for now, this poem will have to suffice as an emblem of the four basic tasks confronting my project. The first takes form in Stevens’s sense of the contradictory demands that history imposes on Modernist poets. Clearly the poets have good reason to conceive themselves as history’s exiles. Given the increasing social power of Enlightenment principles, they have no alternative but to be intensely suspicious of those values cultivated by their own imaginative traditions. Yet the fullness of those memories makes it extremely difficult not also to distrust a modern cultural order for which those hymns have “no more meaning than tomorrow’s bread.” However, those very suspicions also sanction a belief that through their exile they come to engage other, potentially deeper levels of history, where one can locate the sense of abiding needs, energies, and powers that attracted Eliot, Pound, Moore, and Stevens.<sup>4</sup> The result is the imposing on readers of a complex double bind that replicates the poets’ basic dilemma: We must situate the poetry in relation to its historical context, but we must do so in a way that is responsive to its own sense of how easily benedictions become epitaphs, unless they manage to construct an imaginative life not reducible to the specific ideological structures and the play of local interests out of which they are generated.

Negotiating that bind requires the other three basic tasks. If we are to identify provisionally with the Modernist poets’ versions of their own historical project, we must be able to specify how the art can construct models of agency and versions of emotional economy that provide significant alternatives to those of the mainstream culture. Where the Romantic lyric sensibility previously had reigned, there we must locate

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dispositions of energy, and ways of engaging experience, that promise new means for representing our psychic lives to ourselves. To accomplish this, we also must take up the third task, that of learning to see how the internal logic constituting the incantation can carry the force of personal eloquence without relying on the dramatic and melodramatic theaters invoked by Romantic lyricism. We must be able to connect these formal structures to aspects of psychic powers embodied in new modes of human agency, and we must construct critical principles for projecting the modes of authority that can be established as alternatives to the professor's empiricism. Here the example of the theory and practice of the visual arts proves crucial, because it is in those domains that the opposition between incantation and empirical description has been most fully developed. Modernist art demonstrated the capacity of formal energies to reject mimetic structures and still retain extraordinary semantic force by relying directly on the production of exemplary attitudes that an audience might project into extraartistic contexts.

Last, since few contemporary theorists emphasize reading art for the infinite incantations of ourselves that it offers, I find myself relying on a critical perspective that may be anachronistic, or may prove genuinely radical, in its refusal of the prevailing "advanced" critical positions. For I shall neither deconstruct the poets' works nor treat them as elements within a complex network of social practices that can best be understood in terms of social ideology. In my view, before we allow ourselves such distanced analytic stances for reading *against* texts, we must learn to read *through* them by coming to appreciate the specific imaginative experiences they offer when taken as deliberate authorial constructs. Without that labor of provisional identification, the suspicious or deconstructive critic is simply not dealing with a sufficiently rich version of the object. And once one has put in the necessary labor (at least, once I had put in what I thought was the necessary labor), there seems little point in such suspicious enterprises. I am sure that there is much in this Modernist poetry to expose, or "problematize," or display as "undecidable," or adapt to various political practices. But all of those endeavors seem to me only to repeat, in increasingly sophisticated modes, the basic position of our professor, often without even providing the principles needed to recommend their practices as a socially important way to read works of art (since one would have to impose the same critical strictures on one's own claims). Because the Modernist poets sought to propose certain ideal structures displaying and testing possible powers of mind, it seems to me crucial to attempt to understand them on their own terms, if only as a means of focusing attention on specific values that, fully grasped, may provoke us to more accurate and more intricate versions of our own contemporaneity. By assuming that the historicizing of art requires a



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critical cavalry saving us from ideological mystification, “advanced” contemporary criticism risks losing sight of the many different social roles that art’s constructive energies make available.

I would love to engage in theoretical arguments on these matters, but no one would wish this book longer. More important, the dominant critical positions are themselves now so suspicious of purely theoretical argument that I despair of finding common grounds on which to debate. There are so many practical ways of adapting deconstruction and the new historicism that no one theoretical attack could possibly hit the mark.<sup>5</sup> So the most prudent strategy is to accept the antifoundational nostrum that there are simply no ahistorical grounds to which theory can appeal: There are only pragmatic measures of how certain interests are served by specific critical approaches. Then the crucial question becomes how representative and useful one can make one’s own case. And that can be resolved only by assessing my specific analyses. It would be foolish to let general suspicions about the terms for recommendation prevent us from exploring the degree to which the remarkable intelligence of Modernist poetry can challenge and perhaps even guide contemporary imaginations.

I envision this book as developing pragmatic implications for a stance that I can only call aesthetic idealism. Therefore, while I invoke historical contexts and try to elaborate a complex dialectical interpretation of the artists’ relations to those contexts, I concentrate on how the stances that the artists elaborate have plausible claims on our contemporary values. This, in turn, requires two fundamental departures from traditional historical work on Modernism. First, although I shall be quite abstract and rely a good deal on the history of ideas, I shall not be content to describe intellectual backgrounds or fields of influence. Several scholars have recently done superb work in this vein.<sup>6</sup> So the primary need now is to show why such work matters: both how it helps us to read concrete works of art closely enough to appreciate them as distinctive processes of thinking, and how we develop languages to evaluate those processes.

The second departure involves my use of art history. Here it seems to me especially important not to confine oneself to the ideas or general stylistic models that may have influenced the poets. Minimally, we need to move from ideas to the concrete drama of possibility and threat that occurred as poets attended exhibitions or visited artists’ studios, and as they imagined what this release from bondage to the representational principles fostering empiricist values might make available for their own work. Although the writers cared about the ideas, what moved their imaginations and engaged them in the rather scary task of trying to be absolutely modern was their specific encounter with works of art. We cannot know what they saw. Yet the better we understand that their



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works come fully alive under modes of reading informed by that visual art, the more likely we are to be able to provide speculative accounts of the challenges they saw themselves facing and the opportunities they envisioned for making their own medium explore possible models of agency. What poets learn from visual artists is usually not what those artists see in one another's work. Poets are likely to interpret visual experience by casting it in thematic terms. Therefore, critics tempted to draw analogies between the verbal and visual arts need to be rather bold in their speculations. Serious problems can arise in that activity, and there is no clear theoretical way to limit the field, because there is no obvious set of conditions one can propose for the different interpretations that the various practitioners give of what they encounter. All one can do is to make one's principles explicit and then push the analogies that seem plausible as far as possible. Even when we run into trouble or think we have reached a limit to the analogies, we will find our own experience a plausible encounter with problems that the poets themselves had to confront. And, more important for me, then it makes sense for literary critics, who may not respond to the full visual energies of a painting, to employ their own ways of participating in the imaginative life of the paintings. Even if we miss or distort what would engage painters, we might well be following precisely the tracks that fascinated those whose business is words.

In order to carry out the tasks I have been proposing, I have divided this book into four sections. The first consists of two introductory chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the strategies and values that become central when we approach Modernist poetry in terms of its relations to contemporaneous experiments in the visual arts, and Chapter 2 (along with my second appendix) elaborates the theoretical problems that we must confront if we are to deal clearly with those strategies and values. In Chapters 3 and 4, the second section of the book shifts from theory to history as it attempts to illustrate the set of imaginative problems to which Modernist poetry envisioned itself responding. This history dwells entirely on the structure of various imaginative attitudes, so it simply ignores material social forces and thus makes no effort to provide explanations for the phenomena it dwells on. For this book, at least, history matters not for what it caused, but for the figurative energies artists and writers brought to the process of responding to the pressures imposed by those causal forces.

The process of historical contextualizing culminates, in Chapter 5, with T. S. Eliot, the first American poet to develop a style sufficiently intricate and self-reflexive to be a truly Modernist instrument for engaging those cultural tensions. His early work shows us how many of the basic principles of Modernist abstraction derive from, and deepen, the

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spiritual paralysis that he found in the nineteenth century. And that, in turn, shows why, although Eliot is important in his own right, his major role in my story will be as an emblem. Seeing Eliot's apparent paralysis before the intricacy of his own self-reflexive powers, his peers had to seek alternative models for applying the very techniques he made available.

The third part of this book then turns to the task of clarifying what was at stake in those alternative models. In Chapter 6, I return to dialectical potentials within Impressionism that were displaced by Symbolist abstraction, then I work out the imaginative challenges to poetry that got defined through three distinctive Modernist painterly styles, each transforming the models of agency and constructive powers developed by its predecessor: Cézanne's pursuit of "realization;" Braque's and Picasso's early Cubist work, with its quite different adaptations of Cézanne's unmaking of sculptural space; and Malevich's noniconic internalizing of the modes of psychological activity explored in Cubism. On that basis, Chapter 7 can proceed to the fundamental principles of three parallel literary styles. From Cézanne, Williams's basic ambitions become clear; from Cubism, we come to appreciate the models of metamorphosis and artistic testimony basic to Stevens and to Stein; and from noniconic abstraction, we find useful parallels for the imaginative energies at work in poets as traditional, and as different, as William Butler Yeats and Marianne Moore.

This "grammar" of Modernist styles dramatizes the range of attitudes and values that abstraction enables the poets to explore. But it cannot sufficiently test the imaginative force of those experiments. For that, we need a fourth section (Chapters 8 and 9) devoted to aspects of poetic careers, where we can observe a poet grappling over a considerable period of time with a full panoply of values that painting affords, or at least that painting helps us describe. By turning to Pound as he worked his way beyond Vorticism, and to Stevens as he sought a form of social commitment free of the defensiveness and oversimplification of his political poems, I hope to show how the best Modernist poets transformed the painterly roots of Modernist aesthetics into a full writerly ethics. For, once the visual arts had freed the poets from traditional ideals of descriptive adequacy and symbolic depth, they found themselves forced to base their claims on the specific energies and reflective powers that they could demonstrate simply by the qualities of experience that their own medium makes available. Pound and Stevens then prove especially important, because they define sharply competing stances clarifying the two basic structures framing the variety of writerly ethics that we find central to the other Modernists, and indeed to the projects of several contemporary poets. These two poets became for poetry what Picasso and Mondrian