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0521345332 - A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950

Albert Gelpi

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Janus-Face of Romanticism and Modernism

but gods always face two-ways. . . .

H. D., *The Walls Do Not Fall*

A Coherent Splendor is a companion volume to *The Tenth Muse* (1975). Although each book has its own integrity, together they comprise a single extensive essay on the American poetic tradition. *The Tenth Muse* traced the development of American Romantic poetry both out of and against its Calvinist source through chapters on five poets – Edward Taylor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. *A Coherent Splendor* traces the development of American Modernist poetry both out of and against American Romanticism by focusing on a range of poets from that astonishing generation born in the final decades of the nineteenth century and coming to poetic maturity in the years just before and after World War I: Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, H. D., William Carlos Williams, Allen Tate, Hart Crane, Yvor Winters, Robinson Jeffers.

What distinguishes these two books from such excellent earlier studies as Roy Harvey Pearce's *Continuity of American Poetry* and Hyatt Waggoner's *American Poets* is the mounting of a literary-historical argument through the extended and detailed study of major representatives. The chapters aim at something of the comprehensiveness and depth of a monograph on the individual poets, while locating them in the broader cultural landscape. As in *The Tenth Muse*, then, my purpose here is double, at once historical and interpretive: to substantiate the argument about the tradition through detailed readings of important poems of the first half of this century. The historical argument provides the thread of continuity, and at the same time the explications are given such heft and force that they are never mere appendages to the discourse. The argument is less a clothesline for dangling scraps of illustrative literary laundry than a lifeline for entering and mapping the labyrinth and emerging enlightened.

Having spent more than ten years on the preparation of this book, I am acutely aware of the many distinguished scholars and critics who have written, often with assumptions and conclusions differing from my own and from one

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another's, about the period under discussion or about one of its poets. Nonetheless, I decided to omit references to other secondary works unless I was using or taking issue with a particular point or insight for the simple but compelling reason that in a book of this scope I could find no effective way to cite, much less to review, all of the pertinent commentary without doubling its size and cluttering and obscuring my own effort at clarification.

The book's title, adapted from Ezra Pound, evokes the Modernist goal: the imaginative fashioning of the unruly and resistant materials of experience through the expressive resources of the medium – paint, stone, language – into an autotelic work of coherent splendor. But the chapter titles, in deliberate contrast, all suggest the divisions, ambivalences, and conflicts which both necessitated and constrained, impelled and deconstructed the Modernist experiment at almost every point. The dissonance impelling the drive to consonance underlies the design of the chapters as well. This introduction sets up, for the subsequent chapters to substantiate and develop, the terms of the dissonance between Romanticism and Modernism and the terms of the dissonances within both Romanticism and Modernism which provide continuity between the two supposedly opposing ideologies which is deeper and more interesting than the initial points of contrast. The six central chapters, dealing with the careers of the major American Modernist poets, are framed: on the one side by a chapter on two pre-Modernists, Frost and Ransom, who anticipate some of the critical metaphysical and psychological dilemmas of the period without experimenting with aesthetic resolutions; and on the other side by a coda on two contrasting anti-Modernists, Winters and Jeffers, who define those same issues by contending against them from adversarial perspectives.

A number of commentators have accepted the Modernists' programmatic declaration that they defined their ideological positions in opposition to the Romantic advocacy of an Idealist metaphysics, a personalist psychology, and an intuitive epistemology. But I argue here for a subtler continuity between Romanticism and Modernism beneath the avowed discontinuity. Even more, I argue for a recognition that the epistemological, and so the aesthetic, divisions within Romanticism itself anticipate and lead to the divisions within Modernism, or, to turn the point around, that the dialectic within poetic Modernism, enacted in the interaction between its Symbolist and Imagist strains, extends and reconstitutes the epistemological and so the aesthetic issues that defined and then undermined Romanticism.

"Romanticism" and "Modernism" are, of course, slippery terms. Indeed, that slipperiness manifests itself in their ability to mask and unmask one another, to slide into one another only to polarize again; and that very slipperiness is the point of my argument. But let me begin with some broad and elementary remarks which will be both substantiated and complicated in the chapters to come. After the classical period of Greece and Rome, the history of the West has been read in terms of the consolidation of Christianity as the dominant cultural ideology during the Middle Ages and the gradual sub-

version or diffusion of that dominance beginning in the Renaissance. The Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Modernism mediate the dominant cultural ideologies of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, each transition pivoting conveniently at or near the turn of the century. These ideologies mark successive efforts to deal with the rising sense of threat and confusion at every level of life in the West, religious and psychological, philosophic and political: a sense of crisis intensified if not caused by the weakening authority of Christianity in all of those areas.

Where Modernism represented a reaction to Romanticism, Romanticism itself had represented a reaction to the rationalist, Neoclassical ideology of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment sought in some instances to stem, in other instances to supplant, the ebbing of faith with the advance of reason, the decline of theology with the perfection of the empirical method, waning convictions about the sinner's membership in the community of saints with the fallible individual's normative socialization into secular institutions. But Rousseau initiated the transition to Romanticism by realizing that such rationalism repressed the individual's capacity to feel and denied those intimations of self and nature which, like the experience of grace for the Christian, locate the individual within a cosmic scheme. The effect of Cartesian empiricism, epitomized in the statement "I think, therefore I am," was to isolate the individual and then to divide the Christian-incarnational sense of self against itself, setting mind against and above body, subordinating feeling to reason. What's more, between Descartes and Hume, empirical analysis seemed to deconstruct the efficacy of reason itself, and by the end of the eighteenth century, the Romantics had defined themselves out of and against rationalism in the attempt to constitute a new incarnational holism on the basis of the individual's intuitional feeling outside ecclesiastical and civil structures.

This radical ideological shift elevated to primacy the individual's intrinsic capacity to perceive and participate in the organic interrelatedness of all forms of natural life and the individual's consequent capacity to intuit the metaphysical reality from which that natural harmony proceeds, which it manifests, and on which it depends. Assimilating gnostic Neoplatonism, German Idealism, and Oriental mysticism, the Romantic supplanted the right reason of the Renaissance and the logical reason of the Enlightenment with transcendental Reason, appropriately capitalized. Its flashes of intuitive perception superseded mere lowercase reason and revealed, in the contingencies of material existence, the indwelling essence of the Absolute.

In the aesthetic realm, transcendental Reason functions as the Imagination, and where the Neoclassical imagination had been charged with selecting and assembling expressive forms for the poet's thoughts, the Romantic Imagination assumed the awesome task of articulating those visionary spots of timeless time in an aesthetic form not only appropriate to but ideally unique to the personal experience being rendered. In English poetry this notion of an organic form turned the Romantics from the Neoclassical codification of genres and conventions to the more flexible possibilities of blank verse and the

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irregular ode stanza. The nascent American poetry, innocent of tradition and achievement, developed the Romantic notion further in the poetic prose of Emerson, the open form of Whitman, the verbal and metrical idiosyncracies of Dickinson.

Romanticism, then, rested on the assumption that meaning – and therefore expression – proceeded from the momentary gestalt, wherein subject and object not merely encountered each other but completed, or at least potentially completed, each other. This personal and individual experience of potential correspondence was the source of Romantic psychology, Romantic politics, Romantic aesthetics. But it was also the source of Romantic instability and self-doubt, and so the genesis of Modernism. That epiphanic gestalt could not be invoked by the mechanics of thought or will; it could only be awaited and attended upon, and its occurrence was rare and fleeting. Romanticism made everything, including its anarchic politics, rest and pivot on such precarious moments in individual experience. No wonder that from the beginning, Romantic ecstasy was accompanied by Romantic angst; Romantic prophecy, by Romantic irony and skepticism. Literature and the arts operated in a state of crisis during the nineteenth century precisely because the moment of participative insight, in which the individual and the world were sealed in a revelation of cosmic and metaphysical harmony, became steadily more difficult to attain and to validate.

The deepening crisis in perception and signification, as the Romantic construct gave way through Victorian doubt to its *fin de siècle* decadence, set the agenda for Modernism. Farther along in the same ongoing process of cultural and social fragmentation that had impelled the Romantic to try a personalistic metaphysical solution, Modernism felt impelled, in turn, to assume a self-consciously anti-Romantic position. With reason long since deconstructed by the empiricists, and now with mystical intuition deconstructed by the Romantics and Victorians, the individual seemed left utterly alone with what the mind and will could make of the dilemma. World War I had swept away the last vestiges of the previous epoch and left a void: hollow men in a waste land.

For the Romantics, the Absolute was taken to be the farthest dimension of personal experience and so the supreme theme of art, though the formal and technical means of art could only imperfectly render the visionary moments which engendered and informed expression. Metaphysics determined – and exceeded – aesthetics as it did politics; failure to achieve aesthetic perfection, like failure to achieve utopia, testified to the paradoxical sublimity and impossibility of Romantic inspiration and aspiration. The Modernists proceeded from a skeptical, experimental, relativistic, even materialistic base to seek an absolute realization and expression which internal and external circumstances seemed to rule out. But for them the notion of the absolute functioned no longer as a measure of experience but as a measure of aesthetic performance. For the Romantics, absolute experience predicated aesthetic failure, but the Modernists could postulate the absolute only as an ultimate

gauge of technical achievement. An aesthetic absolute was not a constituting cause but an experimental effect; its coherence was not referential, as the Romantics claimed, but self-referential; it inhered not in Nature, but in the work itself. Hence the salient characteristics of Modernism: complexity and abstraction, sophisticated technical invention and spatialized form, the conception of the artist as at once supremely self-conscious and supremely impersonal.

So in American poetry Emerson and Stevens, Whitman and Pound make Janus-faces, Romantic and Modernist, looking in opposite directions. But there are subtler understandings of the relation. The Romantics Emerson and Poe themselves make a Janus-face, as do Wordsworth and Byron; and Byron and Poe have been plausibly viewed as crypto-Modernists. By the same token, I would argue, Modernists like Stevens and Pound cannot be understood without reference to Romantic issues and allegiances, for the long shadow in the wake of the Romantic meteor has been starred again and again by bolts and flashes of the old incandescence. Modernists, for all of their loud inveighing against Romanticism, longed for and adopted positions that are unmistakably, though sometimes covertly, Romantic. In other words, the dialectic between Romanticism and Modernism resides in related dialectics within each which establish continuities between them more abiding and constitutive than the overt discontinuities. So Emerson and Stevens, Whitman and Pound – or Emerson and Pound, Whitman and Stevens – are Janus-faces that turn around and face each other.

The ways in which Janus-faces turn out also to be mirror images will, I hope, become fully apparent in the chapters to follow, which pursue these continuities and discontinuities through the interchange between Symbolisme and Imagism as the twinned generative strains of poetic Modernism. Symbolisme can be seen as signaling the disintegration of the Romantic epistemology into Modernism; and Imagism, as signaling the effort within Modernism to recover something of the Romantic epistemology. By the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire had acknowledged Poe as the source of Symbolisme, and it flourished in France at the *fin de siècle* and after, with Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry as its central figures. The Symboliste influence came back into English-language poetry in the first decade of the twentieth century, largely through Arthur Symons' *Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), which, for example, transformed Eliot's poetry when he read it in 1908. A few years later, in 1912, Pound sought to sum up, with his friends Hilda Doolittle and Richard Aldington, the Modernist techniques for a "direct presentation of the 'thing,'" and he first labeled his axioms with the French spelling "Imagisme" to designate it as an alternative to "Symbolisme." Those two movements exerted a deep and abiding influence on twentieth-century poetry, precisely *because* they rest on contradictory notions of the poet's relation to language and of the nature and end of the poetic experience. That is to say, in poetry Romanticism evolved into Modernism, with Symbolisme and Imagism enacting the dissolution of the Romantic synthesis and con-

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stituting, broadly speaking, its subjective and objective epistemological poles: Symbolisme representing the mind's propensity to dissolve impressions of things into figures of its own processes, Imagism representing the mind's propensity to be shaped by its impressions of things.

As early as 1916, Eliot postulated the dilemma of the post-Romantic Modernist in terms of the subject-object split. The first of his six Oxford University Extension Lectures, entitled "The Origins: What Is Romanticism?," derides the old ideology: "Romanticism stands for *excess* in any direction. It splits up into two directions: escape from the world of fact, and devotion to brute fact. . . . the two great currents of the nineteenth century – vague emotionality and the apotheosis of science (realism) alike spring from Rousseau."¹ At Harvard, Eliot had learned about the deleterious effects of Rousseau and Romanticism from Irving Babbitt, but here he had the prescience to present the dissolution of Romanticism into Modernism as a schism – "escape from the world of fact" and "devotion to brute fact" – that adumbrates (and caricatures) the Symboliste and Imagist alternatives. Reduced to the simplest terms, the historical argument of this book is that the epistemological tension within Romanticism diverged into Symbolisme and Imagism, and the interaction between those movements in turn defined the tension within poetic Modernism which made it as much a Janus-face as the Romanticism from which it evolved.

The poets discussed in these pages are all individualists, all white, educated, bourgeois, and all but a couple of them male. My commentary will call attention, from time to time, to the ways in which elitist, individualist assumptions about gender, race, and class limit and even distort the work under discussion. But I shall be more concerned with what the poetry *does* rather than with what it does not do – in part because the most illuminating criticism, in my view, arises and develops from the inside (that is, from inside the work and from inside the critic) and in part because this poetry, whatever its distortions and omissions, addresses issues critical to the psychological and moral life of those who wrote it and those who read it.

I have no naive illusions about the psychological and moral superiority of poets, but their power of articulation invests poetry with a special psychological and moral function: psychological in that it brings us to fuller, deeper consciousness of ourselves and our private and social lives, moral because that comprehension can then inform the discriminations and choices by which we sustain and determine our lives, individually and collectively. Reading the work from the inside does not mean reading uncritically; reckoning of the limitations and distortions is part of the complex process of discrimination which informs judgment and choice. To those who argue that Pound's poetry should not be read or studied because of the passages expressing misogyny, anti-Semitism, and fascist sympathies, Robert Duncan counters that Pound is the century's greatest poet precisely because he most fully and unsparingly, like it or not, represents us to ourselves. We need not agree with Duncan about Pound's preeminence to take his point: because

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poetry epitomizes and mediates the life of consciousness, it requires us – readers as well as poets – to know ourselves in searching and demanding ways, and so opens the possibility of being ourselves and of being something different and perhaps better. For all its personal idiosyncracies and elitist biases, then, Modernist poetry deserves the close and discriminating attention it demands because it constitutes an often valiant, sometimes last-ditch effort to validate poetry as a psychological and moral activity in an increasingly insane and amoral world.

The title of the book comes, as I have indicated, from Pound. Translating Sophocles in the government lunatic asylum where he had been confined as a psychotic, he made Herakles his hero and persona and exulted with Herakles in fate's despite:

what
SPLENDOUR,
IT ALL COHERES.²

Coherence was no longer to be assumed (with the Christians), defined (with the empiricists), received (with the Romantics); it was only to be wrought. To baffled readers of *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, Eliot and Pound spoke for their generation in voicing not coherence but confusion. Maybe never before had expression seemed so inchoate, so flauntingly exploitive of its need for coherence. By hindsight we can speculate that even more radically than the art of the previous centuries Modernist art manifested, even made a show of, its volatile contradictions: the artist perforce wore a Janus-mask. Nonetheless, despite doubts and self-doubts, against conflicts within and without, the Modernists relied on their prestidigitative agility in concocting an art object that would revolve like an unwobbling pivot on its own tensions.

The artists of this generation loom heroically larger than life, perhaps even more to us today than to their contemporaries, because of their determination to prove equal to the immensity of the task. Life at war set the terms of the imagination's survival; "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" constitutes, in Stevens' words, "the violence from within that protects us from a violence without."³ The splendor of what these poets managed in their "rage for order" is its own attestation: an eccentric and combustible coherence raying from and encircling the dark, violent center.

I

*Robert Frost and John Crowe
Ransom: Diptych of Ironists,
the Woodsman and the
Chevalier*

The internationalist spirit of Modernism made its poets view Emerson and Poe, Whitman and Dickinson as quaint and provincial, in fact drew many of them – Pound, Eliot, H. D., Gertrude Stein – abroad to mingle with Old World expatriates like Joyce, Lawrence, Picasso, Stravinsky. Williams chose the local, but his locality allowed him to be part of the New York Vortex. Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine was part of the Second City's attempt to prove itself a Midwestern Vortex, but Pound had grave doubts and Hart Crane gravitated from Ohio to the sophisticated New York scene rather than the Chicago Renaissance of Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay. So the calculated Yankee and southern regionalism, even provinciality, of Robert Frost and John Crowe Ransom represents as much an ideological and aesthetic stance as does the identification of Robinson Jeffers and Yvor Winters with California. The discussion of Frost and Ransom here and of Winters and Jeffers in the final chapter brackets and lends context to the consideration of the American Modernist poets in the body of the book.

Frost and Ransom, along with Stevens, seemed older in spirit than the others (though Ransom was in fact about the same age as Eliot and Pound). Ransom saw Frost as one of the poets who "are evidently influenced by modernism without caring to 'go modern' in the sense of joining the revolution,"¹ and he was in that group as surely as was Frost. Yet if their old-fashioned regionalism symbolizes their distance from avant-garde experimentation, their importance to the period provides not just a perspective on poetic Modernism but a way into the subject. Frost began his public career through the advocacy of Pound and at the end was the principal advocate for Pound's release from the asylum. And despite Ransom's personal taste for the seventeenth-century poets, his New Criticism popularized the Modernist notion of the autotelic integrity of the art object into a critical methodology that came to dominate the literary establishment of the middle decades of the century.

Though Ransom and Frost did not correspond much with each other and were not intimate friends, they enjoyed a long and mutually respectful association. As the reader who recommended Ransom's first book, *Poems*

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About God, to his own publisher, Frost regarded Ransom as one of his discoveries. Though Ransom would disown most of those poems, Frost thought they had “the art, and . . . the tune,” and the first reviewers tended to peg Ransom as a southern Frost. One anonymous reviewer pointed to the “colloquial manner” which linked the two; from the vantage point of the English tradition, Robert Graves saw in Ransom and Frost, as in Lindsay and Sandburg, a combination of colloquialism and provincialism; even fellow-southerner John Gould Fletcher called Ransom a “more urbane Frost.”²

In the late 1930s it was Frost who, declining a regular faculty appointment at Kenyon College, recommended Ransom for the position from which he was to reign as teacher and editor of *The Kenyon Review*. The two poets maintained their acquaintance during Frost’s almost annual periods of residence at Kenyon and during Ransom’s frequent summer stints at the Bread Loaf School of English near Frost’s Vermont home, which Frost lent to the Ransoms for the summer of 1942. During Frost’s 1956 visit to Kenyon, he told the students that Ransom was “the greatest living American poet” – an accolade he did not easily confer on competitors, even for a moment’s graciousness.³ To Ransom much of Frost’s poetry was “anything but pretentious,” “trim and easy”⁴ without the density and allusive complexity which the New Criticism would make hallmarks for judgment. Nonetheless, in a late *Kenyon Review* overview of the “Poetry of 1900–1950” he ranked Frost among the major poets of the period along with Hardy, Yeats, Robinson, and Eliot, but with his more Modernist contemporaries Williams, Pound, Moore, Cummings, Crane, and Tate classified as minor poets, and with Stevens suspended between major and minor rank.⁵

Frost and Ransom shared a commitment to revitalizing poetic diction and poetic form without violating them, and that commitment rested on a strain of irony that served as both defense and offense against desperate-cosmological odds. Ransom described their particular sense of irony, its sources and ends, in an early essay on Frost:

Irony may be regarded as the ultimate mode of the great minds – it presupposes the others. It implies first of all an honorable and strenuous period of romantic creation; it implies then a rejection of the romantic forms and formulas; but this rejection is so unwilling, and in its statements there lingers so much of the music and color and romantic mystery which is perhaps the absolute poetry, and this statement is attended by such a disarming rueful comic sense of the poet’s own betrayal, that the fruit of it is wisdom and not bitterness, poetry and not prose, health and not suicide. Irony is the rarest of the states of mind, because it is the most inclusive; the whole mind has been active in arriving at it, both creation and criticism, both poetry and science. But this brief description is ridiculously inadequate for what is both exquisite and intricate.⁶

Frost’s poetry, Ransom went on to say, is modern precisely because “its spirit transcends the Nineteenth Century mind and goes back to further places in the English tradition for its adult affiliations.” If this sentence, written for *The*

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Fugitive in 1925, sounds Eliotic, there is good reason, and irony inescapably permeates a century as conflicted as the twentieth.

But what makes poets not just modern but Modernist is the determination not to go back but to press beyond dualistic irony to rediscover the “music and color and romantic mystery” of “absolute poetry,” to press beyond the defeated sense of betrayal in the conviction that the imagination, even without the Romantic props furnished by “the Nineteenth Century mind,” was capacious enough, resilient enough, energetic enough to contend with its situation, maybe even to transform or transcend it. The lack of such determination and conviction is what distinguished Frost and Ransom from their Modernist contemporaries, even from Stevens, and made the risky experiment to reconstitute the language and form of poetry seem to them the folly of misguided youth.

I

I

Although William Prescott Frost of New Hampshire took his wife to San Francisco shortly after their marriage, and although he expressed his Copperhead sympathies by naming his son after the commander of the Confederate forces, the Frosts were tenaciously Yankee, and after returning to New England before the age of ten, Robert Lee Frost planted himself, body and spirit, in its rocky soil as a return to his sources. For good reason the poet chose throughout his life to play the farmer-woodsman of New Hampshire and Vermont.

To the Puritans, nature had first meant a savage and forbidding wilderness at the sight of which, Anne Bradstreet said, “My heart rose.” New England culture began when these hard-pressed pioneers learned, as Frost put it in “The Gift Outright,” to stop withholding themselves from the land and “found salvation in surrender.”⁷ Seventeenth-century diaries and journals begin to record quite early, despite the thinness of the soil and the harshness of the winters, a deepening sensitivity to nature, perceived no longer merely as the hostile environment which a civilized mind and Christian will must subdue but, quite the contrary, as the manifestation of the Creator in his creation. Edward Taylor and Jonathan Edwards expressed the generally accepted notion that the phenomena and events of everyday experience were types – that is, symbols ordained by God to reveal the workings of his gracious intentions in the natural order and in the lives of individuals and of the community. The transition to Romanticism can be summed up in Emerson’s translation of Taylor’s reading of nature as a panorama of types into a sense of nature as a kaleidoscope of symbols for the Oversoul. Frost was both Calvinist and Romantic – and neither; nature, he knew, was inhuman, but his hesitation about whether its inhumanity meant that nature was savage or divine made him wary both of finding salvation in surrender to the land and of “getting too transcended.”⁸ Frost characteristically wanted it both ways: