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Albert Gelpi

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CHAPTER I

*Twentieth-Century American Poetics:
An Overview***From Romanticism to Modernism**

Terms embracing large cultural and aesthetic ideologies – Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism – change their protean shape and color in different hands and perspectives, but they are nevertheless useful markers in defining and comparing successive periods of cultural history. Indeed, the very imprecision of such epithets – the fact that they enfold inconsistencies and rest in contradictions and paradoxes – allows us to identify and trace the volatile play and counterplay of issues and values as a given period defines itself in relation to its antecedents and sets the terms for what will follow from it. The sections of this chapter trace three intertwined lines of descent that comprise a large historical argument about the poetics of twentieth-century American poetry.

In *A Coherent Splendor*, I argued that the Modernist period, bracketed by the two world wars, bore a complicated and ambivalent relation to Romanticism, the dominant aesthetic and cultural ideology of the nineteenth century; that Romanticism had itself evolved out of and explicitly against Enlightenment rationalism; and that the Enlightenment, in its turn, had deepened the growing skepticism since the Renaissance about theological or metaphysical absolutes capable of sustaining a reliable relation between subject and object, mind and matter, physics and metaphysics. Enlightenment rationalists might declare that they had disproved the authority of established systems of belief, but the Romantics saw the rationalist arguments as reducing metaphysics to physics, the supernatural to the natural, and thus as exposing the limits of mere human reason as a faculty for comprehending the nature of reality and the mystery of existence. In response to the epistemological and religious crisis, the Romantics sought to ground insight into reality neither in reason nor institutional systems of belief but in the felt experience of the individual. Induction and deduction yield to personal intuition of the universal in the particulars of experience, of

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the absolute in the passing contingencies of time and space. These moments of perception constitute acts of genuine signification that offer the deepest human understandings and proceed from the highest human faculty of cognition, which philosophers, following Kant, called transcendental Reason and artists called Imagination. And for the artist, the Imagination moves to expression in a form inspired, inspired by the generative experience.

Thus Romantic epistemology, psychology, and aesthetics proposed an organic triad of correspondences between the perceiving subject, the perceived world, and the medium of expression in the subtending activity of Spirit. The most influential theoretician of the Romantic Imagination in England was Coleridge, and in America Emerson; its most influential exemplars were Wordsworth and Whitman. But visionary insight is difficult to attain, much less to maintain, and Romanticism put such stress on the individual's momentary experience that the Romantic synthesis of subject and object, poet and nature through the agency of the Imagination began to deconstruct almost as soon as it was ventured. The literature of the nineteenth century records the dissolution of Romantic ecstasy into Romantic irony and paradox: from Blake's visions and Wordsworth's early nature mysticism to the decadence of the Romantic ideology in fin de siècle aestheticism.

In the opening years of the new century, erupting in the war that seemed to many besides Spengler symptomatic of the "decline of the West," Modernism aggressively advanced a counter-ideology to an exhausted Romanticism, explicitly rejecting its epistemological and metaphysical idealism, its aggrandizement of the individual ego, its organic model for the instantiation of seer and seen, word and meaning. As the experience of organic continuity gave way to a deepening sense of the discontinuity between subject and object, the consequent fracture of perceiving self and perceived world required a different notion of the function of form. Where Romantic form assumed and strove for an organic wholeness, Modernist form required invention and artifice, the construction of the art object from the fragments. The Modernist artwork stood as an often desperate, even heroic insistence on coherence against the instability of nature, the unreliability of perception, and the tragedy of human history. For the Modernist, therefore, form came to mean not a discovered correspondence with nature, but almost the opposite: form organic only in the internal functioning of its parts, abstracted from nature and pieced together into an artifact that aimed to be – T. S. Eliot's adjective – "autotelic": its own end, its meaning literally manufactured (handmade) in its construction.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Twentieth-Century American Poetics: An Overview*

3

From this point of view, Modernism can be seen as arising from the intensification of Romantic tensions to the point of rupture. The critical discussion of Modernism has concentrated on the shattering of formal conventions as an expression of the disintegration of traditional values, and this is indeed the aspect of Modernism that anticipates Postmodernism. Marjorie Perloff has dubbed the Modernist aesthetic, in the title of her influential study, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, and in *The Futurist Moment* she traced how writers learned, from avant-garde artists' turn to collage, experimental techniques for verbal bricolage. The fixing of bits and pieces in an arrested arrangement compelled a dramatic shift from the temporal aesthetic of natural process to a spatial poetics of invented arrangement: in painting, three-dimensional objects flattened into a surface design; in poetry, the lyric speaker splintered into contrasting voices, sequentiality reassembled in juxtapositions; in music, chordal juxtaposition in place of melodic development. Thus Picasso's Cubism, Kandinsky's abstractions, Pound's ideogrammic method, Schönberg's jarring atonalities.

However, as I have already begun to suggest, although Modernism as an aesthetic and cultural ideology began in indeterminacy and rupture, it did not end there, because most Modernists could not accept and abide in indeterminacy and rupture. Even the patterning of bits and pieces into collage and bricolage, I would argue, is evidence not just of the disintegration of self and world but, at least as importantly, of a counter-determination to resist disintegration. Fragmentation aroused in artists an urgent need to build, to press the imagination to create form from formlessness. If order could not be found, it could be made, and that aesthetic coherence constituted the high function of art. Wallace Stevens spoke for his Modernist peers when he said that a "blessed rage for order" conferred on the driven artist a heroic nobility in an ignoble time and a vital function in society, since the work of imagination "helps us to live our lives."² Similarly, when Ezra Pound charged his contemporaries to make it new, the fiat of that aesthetic genesis claimed for the artist a creative and transforming power in social and cultural life.

So I read poetic Modernism differently from many distinguished commentators on the subject, Marjorie Perloff and Hugh Kenner among them, in arguing that the Modernists were aiming not at, or not finally at, a poetics of indeterminacy but rather – as suggested by the Poundian title of my study of Modernism – at achieving a coherent splendor. Despite the manifestos and axiomatic pronouncements against Romanticism, Modernism in fact represents an extension and reconstitution of the salient issues that

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Romanticism set out to deal with. In the face of the intellectual, psychological, moral, and political turmoil that had propelled the last two centuries into more and more violent crises, Modernism continued to exalt the imagination as the agency of coherence. Not, the Modernists insisted, the Romantic Imagination with its capital I; but an imagination that, though shorn of mystical and idealist claims, was still the supreme human faculty of cognition, empowering the artist (echoing Stevens again) to decreate disordered experience into aesthetic creation. Even in their most experimental phases, Pound, Eliot, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Stevens all wanted the pieces in their collages to make some kind of picture, however complex and difficult. Against detractors Pound pressed forward with his life's work in the conviction that he would be able to name his cantos, when the pattern was complete, with a single ideogram that would subsume the thousands of pieces. And Stevens, acknowledging that his poems were aimed at intimating bit by bit the supreme fiction, wanted at the end of his life to call his collected poems "The Whole of Harmonium."

Nor need the coherence possible in an artwork, by being autotelic and self-completing, be merely aesthetic, art merely for art's sake, as leftist critics of the 1930s and contemporary Marxists would dismissively have it. Charles Altieri's *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (1990) mounts a compelling argument for the moral efficacy of the Modernist aesthetic. Working from abstraction as a hermeneutic of perception in painting, Altieri reads Eliot, Williams, Pound, and Stevens to show how in poetry as well as painting the abstracting process of decreation and re-creation, hermetic though it be, requires subtle discriminations of perception, and so of consciousness. Such exacting discriminations permit, indeed compel, us to understand ourselves and our situation more precisely and thereby to define the values and commitments on which responsible choice and moral action depend. For Altieri, the Modernist aesthetic comprises not just an epistemology but an ethics: for many in the twentieth century, the only valid way of coming to discernment and commitment.

I would push Altieri's argument and claim that many of the great Modernist poets came by different paths to realize the psychological and moral limits of the poetics of indeterminacy and superseded them. The period of High Modernism – what Perloff called the Futurist Moment – was relatively brief, roughly from 1910 to 1925. The task of superseding indeterminacy served to extend these poets' active careers into mid-century and made for much of their best work. At issue are the nature

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Twentieth-Century American Poetics: An Overview*

5

and function of form: whether, on the one hand, poetic form makes an aesthetic coherence out of the fragments of experience and the incoherence of reality, or whether, on the other hand, the effort at coherence in poetic form strives to reflect or intimate or arrive at a coherence in reality outside the poem. The shift in poetic stance between High Modernism and later developments can be grasped in the contrast between *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*; between “Mauberley” and *A Draft of XXX Cantos* on the one hand and *The Pisan Cantos* and the final *Drafts and Fragments* on the other; between H.D.’s Imagist *Sea Garden* and her long hermetic sequences *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*; between Stevens’s poems in *Harmonium* and *Parts of a World* on the one hand and the poems in *Transport to Summer* and *The Rock* on the other; between the Williams of *Spring and All* and the Williams of *Paterson* and the triadic poems of his last decade.

Different understandings of Modernism make for different evaluations of the earlier and later work of these poets. For Perloff and Altieri, for example, Eliot’s masterpiece is *The Waste Land*; for me it is *Four Quartets*. The prophecy of “What the Thunder Said” at the end of *The Waste Land* finds completion in the epiphany in the chapel at Little Gidding when tragic history is grasped through the mystery of the Incarnation as “a pattern / Of timeless moments.” Out of the confusing polyglossia of *The Waste Land* Eliot’s own voice has emerged and identified itself within a circumambient reality extrinsic to art.

Poetry need no longer be autotelic; in fact, “the poetry does not matter,” “East Coker” tells us, at least not in the way that it has to matter to a High Modernist.³ It was Eliot’s particular Christian perspective – a Calvinist version of Catholicism – that impelled him to conclude that the poetry as poetry does not matter. But other Modernists came to similarly anti-Modernist positions. For all Pound’s disputes with his old friend about religion, he came to a kind of Neoplatonist pantheism synthesized from the Greek mysteries and the Chinese *tao* that allowed him, in *The Pisan Cantos* and the last *Drafts and Fragments*, to repudiate Modernist aestheticism. “Le Paradis n’est pas artificiel” is a refrain in the later *Cantos*; paradise is not a narcotic fantasy, as Baudelaire had said, but “terrestre,” realizable in the eternal round of nature. In Canto 81, the goddess’s eyes attend Pound in his prison tent and reveal a vision in which the chastened ego consents to “[l]earn of the green world what can be thy place / In scaled invention or true artistry.” By Canto 116, when Pound has to acknowledge that he will never complete and name his life’s work, he is able to give his incomplete poem an unexpected affirmation by concluding: “it coheres

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[More information](#)

all right / even if my notes do not cohere.” “I have tried to write Paradise,” but if the poem has failed in “true artistry,” the failure is – only – aesthetic, not metaphysical; coherence lies in the ongoing *tao*. Meaning surpasses the “scaled invention” of Modernist means.⁴

Neither Stevens nor H.D. nor Williams would ever question the integrity of the poem in so fundamental a way as Pound or Eliot did, but the late work of all three intimated a point of reference and relevance outside their poetry. H.D.’s late autobiographical sequences intend to cast a spell as they voice prayers and invocations weaving a syncretic myth from the Christian, Greek, and Egyptian sources, which finally spells out the bare initials of her name into her “Hermetic Definition.” Stevens’s lengthening meditations turn and turn on archetypes – father, mother, anima, ephebe – constellated around images of the completed self as giant, hero, major man; and increasingly the language of the poems invests its fictive images with an aura of mystery, as though those images were portents of a further and numinous reality: “like rubies reddened by rubies, reddening.”⁵ The quasi-religious vocabulary and transcendental aura of late Stevens point away from the humanist agnosticism of an early poem like “To an Old Christian Woman” and anticipate his acceptance of Catholicism during the last weeks of his life. Even Williams found, by the time of *Paterson V* and the triadic poems in *Pictures from Brueghel*, that his resolutely anti-metaphysical humanism had deepened to the point that it had to express itself in mythic and even, occasionally, religious terms.

The longer, late poems of these poets temper their early Modernist stance by opening the visualized, spatial constellation of the poems into sequences in which time dictates both the form and the theme. Canto 30 had stipulated the Modernist dread of time: “Time is the evil. Evil.”⁶ Poems like *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* fracture history into spatial juxtapositions in many voices, but in *Four Quartets* and in the later *Cantos* the poet’s voice emerges from the various speakers to meditate on living in time and history. Eliot wrote the essay on “The Music of Poetry” as he was finishing the *Quartets*, and he was not alone in invoking music rather than painting or sculpture as an analogue for poetic form. Indeed, just at the point when younger, mid-century poets like George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky began adapting Williams’s objectivism, Williams was himself complaining of its static constraints and turning from spatial arrangement of lines to an urgent search for a new, more flexible measure capable of extension. His discovery of what he called the variable foot,⁷ based on the musical bar and stepped in tercets down the page like a score, opened the way into *Paterson* and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Twentieth-Century American Poetics: An Overview*

7

the autobiographical voice of the late poems. Stevens smoothed out the jagged angularities of “Domination of Black” and “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” into the endless silken iambics of the late sequences following the year’s, and life’s, seasons: *Transport to Summer*, *The Auroras of Autumn*.

In my view, then, the key to Modernism resides in its attempt, in the wake of declining faith and debunked reason and decadent Romanticism, to affirm the imagination as the supreme human faculty of cognition for (and against) a secular, skeptical age. The dialectic with Romanticism that constituted and defined Modernism took place, as I have suggested, in two phases. First, the avant-garde High Modernism of the 1910s and 1920s sought to replace Romantic claims for the metaphysical and mystical insight of the imagination by redefining the function of the imagination in terms of a constructive formalism with the capacity and authority to decreate/re-create inchoate experience into a quasi-absolute, autotelic assemblage. Then, in the 1930s, the strict formalism of collage and juxtaposition came increasingly to seem not so much a solution as a static and unresolved dead end, and Modernism opened up to temporal and historical process, recovering or discovering thereby sources of cognition beyond the aesthetic: in the case of Eliot, by a renewal of faith in the Incarnation; in the case of the others – Stevens, Pound, Williams, H.D. – by an exploration of the powers of insight that had been the legacy of Romanticism latent yet active in Modernism all along.

From Modernism to Postmodernism

The epithet “Modernism” came into currency not from the artists themselves (they thought of themselves as moderns, as opposed to Romantics or Victorians, but not Modernists), but from retroactive commentary of critics and literary historians. In fact, the currency of the term marked the end of the period, and critics soon coined the term “Postmodernism” to distinguish subsequent developments. The Postmodernist break with Modernism serves to define the poetry of the Cold War decades, but just as Modernism defined itself not just against but, in many ways, in dialogue with Romanticism, so Postmodernism defined itself not just in opposition to but in dialogue with Modernism, as the transition played itself out over two generations of poets.

The poets who began to publish just after World War II found themselves awed and overshadowed by the enormous achievements of their legendary predecessors, most of them still alive and writing. Lynn Keller’s

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Re-making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition (1987) focuses on the continuities and discontinuities between Modernist and Postmodernist poetics by studying four exemplary pairings: Stevens and John Ashbery, Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, Williams and Robert Creeley, and W. H. Auden and James Merrill. But other pairings across the generational divide and the years of the war also spring to mind: Allen Tate and Robert Lowell, Pound and Charles Olson or Robert Duncan, Williams and Denise Levertov, Robinson Jeffers and William Everson, W. B. Yeats and John Berryman, Frost or Stevens and Adrienne Rich. What these pairings confirm is not just the lingering presence of the long-lived and larger-than-life predecessors but also the deepening sense of a different poetic sensibility that initiates the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism in the poetry of the Cold War period.

Modernism had formulated, out of a yawning fear of impotence before the gathering forces of indeterminacy and chaos, a determined, if sometimes anxious, assertion of the authority of the imagination and the integrity of the medium. In the ashes of Berlin and Tokyo, Hiroshima and Auschwitz, that effort came to seem, to many postwar poets, an untenable and doomed retreat from history into an overreaching aestheticism. The word had to rise from those ashes: test the ground of reference, investigate the possibilities and limits of meaning, speak in the face of its own uncertainties. Postmodernism took shape as a poetics of indeterminacy without the Modernist counter-resolve to resist indeterminacy. At the same time, I would contend, Postmodernist is too categorical and simplified a label for the poetry of the Cold War period. That generation of poets was still so imbued with Modernist values and with the residual Romanticism inherent in those values that while many of them yield to a poetics of indeterminacy, others exhibit a Neoromanticism that offers an alternative pole to Postmodernism. The chapters of this book make the argument that just as the Modernism of the first half of the century maintained a dialogue with Romanticism, so the poetics of the second half of the century is most accurately seen as a dialogue between Postmodernism and Neoromanticism.

A number of postwar poets exhibit a self-questioning and a scaling back of expectations that point to what would be called Postmodernism, but the decisive and deliberate break came not with the generation of Lowell and Bishop and Rich but rather in the 1970s and 1980s when a number of critics, along with a number of younger poets, mounted a critique of Modernism. These poets looked back not to Pound and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Twentieth-Century American Poetics: An Overview*

9

Williams, much less to Eliot and Stevens, as forebears, but rather to the mid-century Objectivist poets George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky. Much as *Poetry* (Chicago) and *The Dial* had championed Modernism half a century before, so now the Postmodernist poets and Poststructuralist critics, based principally in New York and the San Francisco Bay Area, grouped themselves under the mastheads of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein; *Acts*, edited by David Levi Strauss; and *Poetics Journal*, edited by Barrett Watten and Lyn Hejinian. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984) and Michael Palmer's *Code of Signals: Recent Writings on Poetics* (1983) collected manifestoes and position papers establishing the new work as Language poetry.

The postwar cultural crisis was theorized politically through a Marxist critique of late capitalism; scientifically through Einstein's relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle; psychologically through Lacan's dissection of Freudian ego-psychology; linguistically, via Wittgenstein and Husserl, through a semiotics of the word as free-floating signifier with no clear signification; and literarily through Derrida's deconstruction of language. The designation "Language Poetry" was intended to declare that all we know is language. Moreover, language is not a medium of connection and communication but a code of arbitrary signals determined by extrinsic cultural patterns and political systems and psychological mechanisms, and so closed on itself, and so detached from a reliable apprehension of reality. Kathy Acker writes:

I write with words which are given me ... I am given meaning and I give meaning back to the community ... I am always taking part in the constructing of the political, economic, and moral community in which my discourse is taking place. All aspects of language – denotation, sound, style, syntax, grammar, etc. – are politically, economically, and morally coded.⁸

Although the function of the writer is to use "given meanings and values," thereby "changing them and giving them back" to the community's discourse, the scope and efficacy of such transformation is severely restricted by the terms of the culturally enforced code.

Language poetry, then, reformulated Modernism into Poststructuralist deconstruction. In "Postmodernism: Sign for a Struggle, the Struggle for the Sign," Ron Silliman says that "Modernism ... is but the moment in which the postmodern becomes visible," but "the end of modernism was inscribed" in the spurious "yearning to recapture a lost unity in the functions of language."⁹ This Modernist yearning merely put the mask of impersonality on the Romantic ego-genius; stripping off the mask reveals

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[More information](#)

“an esthetics of fragmentation and discontinuity.”¹⁰ The breach between subject and object, word and world, fragments both. The word does not designate a reality but substitutes for its loss; language expresses not presence but absence. So the theory goes, and it posits a poetics that turns the poem into self-referencing semiotic code.

What, in the end, did L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing prove to be? If the lyric “I” is eliminated, who is speaking, and to whom? Does not a disconnection between signifier and signified disconnect poem and reader? Watten and Hejinian called issue Number 7 of *Poetics Journal* “Postmodern” but hung it with a question mark, suggesting that the term itself was so indeterminate that they were uncertain about or uneasy with it. At the end, not the beginning, of his essay on Postmodernism Silliman asks, “What is the nature and history of a writing that no longer asks for a unified sign?”¹¹ and leaves the question open and unanswered. The last chapter of this book undertakes a response by examining the efforts of several Language poets to find the words for an indeterminate mode of meaning.

From Modernism to Neoromanticism

As we have seen, Modernism reformulated Romanticism in the fragile conviction that through the powers of the imagination formal aesthetic coherence could, if faith and reason and mystical insight could not, perform a vital psychological, moral, even political function that could, or might, make personal and social life possible. “It is,” in Stevens’ words, “the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation.”¹² Postmodernism correctly sees Modernism as a reformulation of Romanticism and – wrongly in my view – takes that fact as the source of Modernist errors and self-deceptions. Bernstein sees Modernism as initiating a poetics of deconstruction but then reverting to “a poetry primarily of personal communication” that is in fact “looking for the natural in ‘direct experience,’ both in terms of recording the actual way objective reality is perceived (the search for the objective) & making the writing a recording instrument of consciousness.”¹³ Similarly, Silliman sees the contradiction of Modernism in its being at once “the announcement of the postmodern” and yet “a lingering hangover from the previous realist paradigm,” and his discussion identifies realism with Romantic notions of “organic form” and an “artificial holism” that posit “a unity between signifier and signified.” He cites the art critic Clement Greenberg for the aspect