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### A Study of Modern Poetry

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#114

A STUDY OF MODERN POETRY

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A Paper

Presented to

Dr. W. A. Powell

Ouachita Baptist University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Honors Special Study Course

#114

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by

Kriste McElhanon

May 1968

## RICHARD WILBUR

Born in New York in 1921, Richard Wilbur has become one of the leading contemporary poets. The former Harvard English professor has a long list of varied accomplishments to his credit. He has written five books of poetry, and he translated many poems including Moliere's "Le Misanthrope." He was the principal lyricist for the Lillian Hellman, Leonard Bernstein production of Voltaire's Candide on Broadway. He selected and compiled The Bestiary, a collection of poems about animals with drawings.

Mr. Wilbur's talent as a translator lies not in strict line by line comparison of the English with the original text but in his faithfulness to "achieve the right tone." This ability is evident in his translation of Francis Jammes' "A Prayer to Go to Paradise with the Donkeys" included in Things of This World. M. L. Rosenthal in an article in Nation suggests that Wilbur is at his best in his translations or in his poetry most closely resembling the "dream-atmosphere of the French Symbolist tradition" as opposed to the meliorism of American poetry. This seems true to a large degree as expressed in this line from "To an American Poet Just Dead":

"It's just as well that now you save your breath."

In his earlier poems (Beautiful Changes and Ceremony) there is a kind of asceticism, an avoidance of the world of the

senses. Objects are truer when imagined than when they are sensed as in

"Caught summer is always an imagined time."

In

I take this world for better or for worse,  
 But seeing rose carafes conceive the sun  
 My thirst conceives a fierier universe.

Mr. Wilbur has difficulty in presenting this vision as truth; he argues for it as an ideal.

Yet in Things of This World Wilbur moved from a mental play with words and delight in the language to an involvement with the present and physical. This is illustrated in his handling of the imagery of the fleshy things which he subjects to a "spiritual transformation" in "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World." He awakes to hear the sounds of morning and sees the clean laundry; then although he shrinks from the thought of entering the world, he accepts involvement with the world.

Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;  
 Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;  
 Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,  
 And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating of  
 dark habits,  
 keeping their difficult balance.

In Things of This World, Wilbur applied his imagination to "things" not to uncover an inner reality superior to the outer, but to present their gaudiness and to celebrate the sensuous enjoyment of them. In this more recent work, Mr. Wilbur has indeed discovered the things of the world.

Characteristic of Mr. Wilbur's poetry is his carefully planned double meanings of words. This includes also his use

of the Latin root-sense meanings. This double meaning enables his poetry to have more than just surface enjoyment. Another characteristic of his poetry is the quality of the metaphor. It is physically suggestive, yet alive with ideas. Mr. Wilbur has a fine ear for smooth-flowing line and self-rounding stanza rhythm. He frequently employs stanzaic forms of widely varied line lengths. This heightens the rhythm and action by allowing for more opportunity for enjambment and it also breaks up the monotony of his deca-syllabic lines.

I enjoyed the poetry of Richard Wilbur very much. I feel that the richly worded poems and the ideas advanced in his poems are characteristic of the contemporary society. Mr. Wilbur has indeed caught the "things of this world" in his poetry. I feel that he should have a definite place on the poetry shelf of the American reader.

e. e. cummings\*

e. e. cummings was born in a house in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1894. cummings was the son of Dr. Edward Cummings, a one-time instructor at Harvard and later a minister of the South Congregational Society in Boston. Apparently cummings was influenced by his father's views on the condition of man and in his protests against all forms of state tyranny. His Puritan heritage (crossed with an emotional temper not unlike St. Francis). He lived most of his life in his modest apartment in Patchin Place in Greenwich Village in New York with his wife Marion Morehouse and his summers at his family's summer home at Silver Lake, New Hampshire. cummings and his wife both are artists--Marion Morehouse is a fine photographer and cummings himself is a maker of drawings and paintings as well as a designer of typographical conventions.

Although his work has been persistently misunderstood by many readers, cummings is without question a serious poet, for lyric and satire play a functional role in a serious view of life. His techniques cannot be understood apart from its relationship to the meaning of his art. cummings, like many writers, believes that one extreme can only be reached by going to the other. cummings believes that there is a natural

\*cummings had his name put legally into lower case.

order that can only be achieved by discarding the artificial orders which man is always trying to impose upon it. This attitude is very much like the romantic tradition of Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. cummings is very much like Coleridge in his belief that views nature as process rather than product, as dynamic rather than static, as becoming rather than being. cummings, like Coleridge, believes that the intuitive or imaginative faculty in man can perceive this "nature" directly--so he is a transcendentalist. cummings feels it is the poet's function to "decry the ordinary world," the world of habit, routine, and abstract categories and exalt the "true, the world which is outside of, above and beyond the ordinary world of everyday preception. cummings would have us renounce our desire for security, for success, for stability, and for comfort.

But cummings feels that the spiritual ideal still needs the ordinary world as an arena in which to fulfill itself. Love not only transforms unlove; it needs that unlove in order to come into being. The more powerful the ordinary world happens to be, the more this living ideal becomes itself. This paradox is what cummings called "the ultimate meaning of existence" ("A Foreword to Krazy", Miscellany, pp. 102-106). This explains "all lose, whole find" (Poems, 1923-1954, p. 398, No. XVI) and "the most who die, the more we live" (Poems, 1923-1954, p. 401).

cummings' politics may be summed up in two words--love and the individual. cummings believes one must experience truth for himself. Thus it follows that one must live at "first hand," refusing to be dominated by one's institutional and societal roles. For him, all groups of more than two are gangs and collectivism. So, for cummings, only the personal is real and happiness can happen only to people. Institutions may harm us and they cannot give us what we want. (See No. XXXIX, Poems, 1923-1954, p. 412.)

cummings calls love the answer. What he calls love is perfect "givingness," giving without thought of return, openly and freely. Because only a person who has achieved perfect selfhood can give freely, only a true individual can love. Therefore the essential condition for society is freedom, for if there were no individuals left no one would ever have any genuine feelings again.

Technically and stylistically, cummings is unconventional and an experimentalist; yet he works with tradition too. He is traditional in his sonnets and quatrains and his use of Elizabethan song, eighteenth century satire, nineteenth century lyric and his closeness to the romantic poets.

His technical innovations are his way of stripping the "film of familiarity from language in order to strip the film of familiarity from the world" (e. e. cummings -- the growth of a writer by Friedman).



cummings uses his technical devices to make the reader feel what he is saying; for to be able to "know" something, he must have felt it somehow. cummings, like most modern writers, is faced with the problem of preventing the deadness of language without losing intelligibility altogether. cummings has found his answer in the magic of words themselves. He has coined a vocabulary in which nouns are made out of verbs, thus preserving sense while at the same time creating motion. The reader achieves insight as he makes the connection between content and form. This grammatical shift imitates the meaning--noun-function and verb-meaning. (See No. 26, p. 443, Poems, 1923-1954).

Another device cummings uses is his unconventional typography. This helps the reader get the "feel" of the poem as it lies on the page. This involves the visual sense of the reader as in a painting. This may have nothing to do with the meaning but it does affect the reader. Also the typography affects the way the poem is read. Pause and emphasis are supported by these devices but most importantly, meanings are created as the reader's mind is slowed in its progress and is forced to go back and forth.

## ROBERT LOWELL

Robert Lowell's poetry is neither "academic" nor "Beat". Many of Lowell's poems require a knowledge of his background, for his local allusions and his special religious attitudes. His style is occasionally so disruptive that it is difficult to see the pattern. His subjects are varied but they have a common characteristic. The general impression is that these poems reflect a profound and constant dissatisfaction with humanity and the universe. His indictments against an idea, a society, or a symbolic human figure are stern and sombre, ranging from violent antipathy to muted scorn.

Lowell is fascinated by graveyards and the ultimate negation. As he states in "Colloquy in Black Rock":

All discussions  
End in the mud flat detritus of death.

His landscapes are filled with rubble, sewage and filth (the end products of erosion, corruption and decay). Human success, normal love, conventional beauty have no place in his vision of the modern world. At the beginning of his career, Lowell's rebellion was more complete. His war is not with a time, a place, or a particular system, but against the pressures of reality itself. As he has developed as a poet, his antagonism has become focused on more clearly defined targets.

His poetry is not merely anarchy and pessimism though. A constructive search for positive values can be seen in his poetry--in Catholic mysticism, in the perspectives of history, and in human relationships. "Home After Three Months Away" and "Man and Wife" (from Life Studies) reach the climax in his climb to reality. Such affirmations are few and late. Usually the conflicts remain unresolved and the theme of rebellion is dominant. His quarrel with actuality focuses upon two main targets: society and authority.

In his first volume of poetry, Lord Weary's Castle, Lowell appears so horrified by the chaos of the present that he scarcely comments on it in realistic terms. These lines from "The Drunken Fisherman" could serve as the book's theme:

Is there no way to cast my hook  
Out of this dynamited brook?

His tendency towards increasing specificity becomes most pronounced in Life Studies, where every poem has its own address:

Given a year,  
I walked on the roof of the West Street Jail. . . .  
("Memories of West Street and Lepke")

As the geographical limits of his poetry contract, Lowell's vision turns inward, so that in Life Studies he is concerned less with universal conflicts or social satire than with his own emotional reactions to people and situations important to his own personal life. The note of rebellion is still present although it is diminished. There is at least a partial acceptance of the order

of things.

For Lowell, the human dilemma is symbolized in the conflict between experience and innocence, between the representatives of authority and their victims. Lowell's rebellion is the expression of a very complex mind and imagination. Most of his poems are networks of interlocking ironies; doubt and faith, affirmation and rejection. A good part of their difficulty arises out of his characteristic ambivalence towards his subject, and this ambivalence is seen most strongly in his attitude toward tradition. Lowell's rejection of one tradition has often been accompanied by his adherence to another. His modifying tradition within its own framework accounts for the central paradox of his poetry. His poetry of rebellion is cast into highly traditional forms. His outcries against order are ordered by rigidly formal rhyme schemes and conventional stanza patterns. But on the whole, by casting his rebellious ideas into traditional moulds, Lowell has gained a measure of control over his material without any loss of force.

## CONRAD AIKEN

Conrad Aiken is one of the most remarkable figures modern literature has produced. The extent and variety of his writings may seem to defy classification, but some essential themes persist. They are developmental--that is, they grow in clarity and importance as Aiken's many approaches diminish and his grasp of the fundamental distinctions between major and lesser forms becomes more certain. Then ultimately becomes impressive for its excellence and depth.

Conrad Aiken presents in Ushant his own record of an event of crucial importance. Not only the event but its impact on the observer was significant.

"... He was retaining all this, and re-enacting it, even to the final scene of all: when, after the desultory early-morning quarrel, came the half-stifled scream, and then the sound of his father's voice counting three, and the two loud pistol-shots; and he had tiptoed into the dark room, where the two bodies lay motionless, and apart, and, finding them dead, found himself possessed of them forever.

(Ushant, p. 302)

The family was dispersed, with Aiken moving from Savannah, Georgia to New Bedford, Massachusetts. In Ushant, Aiken refers to this event as establishing the course of his life and of his writing. He was always, so he says, in the act of "going back," of trying to regain that room and house in Savannah.

The measure of the experience can be found in its recurrences in Aiken's art. Using this limited resource, we may

point out the several varieties of compulsion and guilt which motivate the characters of his works. In general, the struggles of Aiken's heroes to establish an emotional middle ground--between an extreme hatred of the flesh, of the corruptibility of the human species, and an emotional void--seem in one way or another efforts to recover a lost balance and stability from the past. The aesthetic virtue in Conrad Aiken's work is always menaced by the chaos from which it has been rescued. Throughout, the conflict of form and violence recurs in a hundred manifestations.

In his early years as a poet, Aiken tries to find in contemporary poets and pundits support for his own position, one not fully or well defined. While he is intuitively "right" again and again in measuring his contemporaries, the reasons for his choices are more interesting perhaps than the fact that they are choices. He dislikes triviality and mere cleverness; he seeks a style that he describes as "psycho-realistic"; he does not object to luxuriance of style, but he also sees the dangers of mere indulgence in "style" without intellectual substance.

What is Aiken's place as a poet? He has been called an "heir of the romantic movement". His poetry is graceful and gentle, expressing rather than interpreting or valuing the flux of modern life. Aiken has had a restless desire to experiment, to seek out new ways and means of expanding the structure of his poems and of bringing new insights within the range of

new orders. But he has been too much the traditionalist to go to extremes of non-classical, "modern" forms. Rather, his development has been toward a modern restatement of traditional manners. Aiken seems preoccupied with the moral terror of modern life, "The deathlike emptiness of the living experience itself, and all that lies about it. . ." (Beach in *Obsessive Images*, p. 63) Aiken has called the key word "consciousness," or self-knowledge.

Perhaps his greatest contribution has been in a type of coming to terms literature. Very sensitive to the meanings of modern naturalism--a fact that is undoubtedly traceable in part to the tragedy of his childhood--Aiken first tried to meet this defeating knowledge in elaborate romantic retreats from it and then with an excessive virtuosity in romantic declamations. As he turns to the Preludes, Aiken shows again and again a competence in fitting the word to the thought.

ROBINSON JEFFERS

Almost all of Mr. Jeffers' works illustrate a single problem, a spiritual malady of considerable significance. Nature, or God, is a kind of self-sufficient mechanism, of which man is an offshoot, but from which man is cut off by his humanity. Thus there is no mode of communication between the consciousness of man and the mode of existence of God. For Jeffers, the principle of evil is introverted man and his self-centered civilization; the universe is the body of God; the ultimate values are strength to endure life and the promise of oblivion.

In Tamar, Jeffers states his doctrine:

Humanity is the  
start of the race; I say  
Humanity is the mould to break away from,  
the crust to break  
Through, the coal to break into fire,  
The atom to be split.

In one narrative after another he is preoccupied with this theme of incest, a theme recurrent in the poetry of the ancient Greeks and of the early English romantics, both of whom have nourished his imagination.

The motifs vary little from poem to poem, though the tragedy has different nodes. There are the recurrent themes of an all-too-human love, centered upon the self, and of the peace whose source is contemplation of the impersonal, non-moral



universe. The self-delusion of man's self-importance is corollary to this. Opposed to it is the frequent reminder--shown by violent action and horrible harvest--of the danger involved in a crude interpretation of Jeffers' a-social theses.

Yet Jeffers' poetry tells of a pity for humanity as shown in the repeated symbol of the injured hawk or eagle. In the passage in which the eagle image is given significance, the poet, though seeing life as the "scape goat of the greater world," admired and accepts it:

A torch to burn in with pride, a necessary  
Ecstasy in the run of the fold substance. . .  
(Cawdor)

The best of Jeffers' can be found more often in his short poems than in his long narratives. His deep-lunged verse, built on a stress prosody, the changing tempo regulated by his feeling for quantity, proves his sensitiveness to rhythm and pitch. In his poorer poems, his style is at times loose and almost careless, but this is not the case usually; although his poetry is never close.

There is much in his verse which would range him with the traditionalist. But in his awareness of contemporary America, in his readiness to deal with the uglier concrete details of existence, in the freedom of his vocabulary and of his rhythms, he shows himself a modern.

Although Jeffers has been criticized for his philosophy and his means of expressing it, none is more searching than Jeffers' own "Self-Criticism in February":

Well, bite on this: Your poems are too full of  
ghosts and demons,  
And people like phantoms--how often life's are--  
And passion so strained that the clay mouths go  
praying for destruction--  
Alas, it is not unusual in life;  
To every soul at some. But why insist on it?  
And now  
For the worst fault: you have never mistaken  
Demon nor passion nor idealism for the real God.  
Then what is most disliked in those verses  
Remains most true. Unfortunately. If only you  
could sing  
That God is love, or perhaps that social  
Justice will soon prevail. I can tell lies in  
prose.

## EZRA POUND

Pound was born with an exquisitely perceptive ear, and he cultivated an exact sense of language. He first studied the literature of pre-renaissance Europe during which the troubadours composed their finest songs. In fleeing from twentieth century America to twelfth century Provence, Pound was making a romantic escape in appearance only. Although Pound thought he had thrown off the past, his rhyme at times disproved this.

Pound tried to make a new language almost. He did this by introducing unusual rhyme words, and using them in new combinations, and by using the picturesque verb with an exact meaning. Pound learned new structures and practiced them in his first book. He didn't discard the sonnet and the heroic couplet but he experimented with the form of these traditional patterns. He experimented with meters and rhymes until he can get just the tempo and the harmony that makes each poem a song. Dactylic and trochaic lines over iambic in the early poems gives a restlessness and vigor that center attention on the beginning of the line rather than on the rime word. But with his rimes Pound does wonderful things; he makes some echo from stanza to stanza, and others he never resolves; with some words he will build up a melodic refrain, and with others he will cut the

melody.

In reading Pound's poetry, the reader quite frequently finds that Pound does not have very much to say. He covers his lack of critical intelligence by a continual polishing of technique, and by an increasing dogmatism. When Lawrence's Rainbow was suppressed and Joyce's Portrait of an Artist was blacked out, Pound was influential in fighting the tyranny of the public conscience. Pound could express anything he felt, but he failed to develop a consistent philosophy. He seemed to lack the power to pierce deeply into ideas.

In the Cantos, we see Pound's greatest failure. Pound has no scale of values. He very seldom passes judgment outside his field of aesthetics and when he does the judgment is of the most obvious kind. He is made frantic by the politicians, the profiteers, and the obstructors of knowledge who will not keep the possessors of genius immune from the slow contagion of daily life, and from its disastrous combustions. He resents the war, not as the tragedy of our civilization, but as an unpardonably stupid intrusion of the world on the artist;

And Henri Gaudier went to it,  
   and they killed him,  
 And killed a good deal of sculpture,  
 And ole T. E. H. he went to it,  
 With a lot of books from the library,  
 London Library, and a shell buried 'em in a dugout,  
 And the Library expressed its annoyance.  
   (Canto XVI)

Pound has contributed much to contemporary poetry even though we may question his ideas. He does not seem to realize that in anything larger than one brief image words must have

mental significance as well as physical. But Pound did much for poetry--much more than many of his contemporaries. We may belittle his ideas, but there is no belittling his poetic achievement.