

**R**EADERS OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY MAY WELL BE BEWILDERED BY THE EXTRAORDINARY RANGE AND DIVERSITY OF STYLES IN AMERICAN POETRY TODAY.

There is open field poetry, free form poetry, deep image poetry, confessional poetry, collage poetry, concrete poetry, found poetry, social protest poetry, and associational or stream of consciousness poetry. Contemporary poets seem to be writing out of a fragmentary sensibility, using random or arbitrary line arrangements, and expressing a pluralism of life styles. Often this poetry concerns itself with the personal life of the poet, although at other times it may offer us a casual glimpse into some worldwide apocalypse.

In the midst of all this great range and diversity of outlook, the general reader may well ask: why does contemporary poetry seem to be so preoccupied with itself? why is it so often subjective and inaccessible? why is there so little music? why no more simple lyricism or plain style rhyme?

Of course, one can hear the same sort of question at any museum of contemporary painting, or at any concert hall where contemporary music is being performed. Dissonance and abstraction were just as bewildering for the followers of other art forms to assimilate—until they realised that these innovations were simply attempts to embody and transfigure the bewilderment of an era as faithfully and creatively as possible.

What is the bewilderment of our era? It is probably a sense of the overwhelming rapid change in all our lives, and the loss of almost all of our traditional assumptions and assurances.

## 1. THE MODERN SCIENTIFIC AGNOSTICISM

The change in our attitude towards religion may be one of the most revealing and disturbing features of our time. Today we say "GOD IS DEAD" with a sense of mischief and sophistication, whereas the attack on traditional western religion goes as far back as Nietzsche and his Zarathustra. And many of the major shaping minds of our modern era have either challenged the traditional western idea of god, or else they have rejected it outright.

We can see examples of this modern scientific agnosticism if we examine the personal views of Marx, Darwin, Freud and Einstein.

*Karl Marx called religion an opiate of the masses, he said it was a way of keeping people drugged and oblivious to their true social and political condition. Today most modern communist states (probably half the world's present population) are almost completely atheistic, with only an occasional concession to some local splinterfaith.*

*When Charles Darwin formulated his theory of evolution, the descent of man and its corollary "survival of the fittest", he challenged the creation myth of the entire Judeo-Christian world. Darwin himself could not reconcile the notion of a good god with what he perceived to be the horrors of naturalism—he said he could not persuade himself that "a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars."*

*Sigmund Freud seemed to be openly contemptuous of the religious impulse as it manifested itself in the ordinary man. In CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS, Freud wrote that this religious impulse tries to assure the ordinary man*

*that a solicitous Providence is watching over him and will make up to him in a future existence (or any shortcomings in this life. The ordinary man cannot imagine this Providence in any other form but that of a greatly exalted father, for only such a one could understand the needs of the sons of men, or be softened by their prayers and placated by the signs of their remorse. The whole thing is so patently infantile, so incongruous with reality, that to one whose attitude to humanity is friendly it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life.*

*Albert Einstein had a deep reverence for the mysterious principles of energy in our universe, yet he was inevitably agnostic in the face of a personal god. His theory of relativity challenged the space and time concepts of classical mechanics, and it also called into question the traditional theological proofs of god as first cause or prime mover. It is true that Einstein did appeal to god in his famous retort to Werner Heisenberg over the Uncertainty Principle, when Einstein said he did not believe that "god played dice with the universe". But this may have been no more than a figure of speech, and Einstein himself did not believe in the principle of individuation which gives rise to the idea of a personal "soul":*

I feel myself so much a part of everything living, that I am not in the least concerned with the beginning or termination of the concrete existence of any person in this eternal flow.

Of course one can accept the scientific insights of Marx or Darwin or Freud or Einstein, without necessarily accepting their personal agnostic views. There have been other ages of skepticism, and there have been other eras of doubt and bewilderment, but there has also always been the cautionary voice of Psalm 53:

The fool hath said in his heart,  
There is no god.

Perhaps we are in an era that is charged with the rediscovery of our god in some entirely new revelation. As Heidegger writes, perhaps we are all of us lost in a silent night which is awaiting a new dawn of godhead. Perhaps. But meanwhile there is no doubt about the effect which the modern scientific agnosticism has had on our contemporary world, and on our contemporary art.

## 2. COUNTER-ATTACK: THE ARTIST AS PRIEST

As the modern scientific agnosticism was challenging the western religions with all of their traditional assumptions and assurances, there was a curious shift of focus in the realm of art. Around the turn of the century, artists began to feel that if religion were no longer an authentic option for the individual in need of redemption, then perhaps art itself was the only real stronghold for the soul.

This subtle substitution of art for religion is expressed most dramatically in the "non serviam" of James Joyce:

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile and cunning.

The painter Paul Cezanne exalted this alternative when he asked:

Is art really a priesthood that demands the pure in heart who must belong to it entirely?

Arthur Rimbaud called the poet "a thief of fire", that is, a renegade Prometheus priest figure who rekindled mankind by providing it with a sacred forbidden flame.

Throughout his life and poetry, Rainer Maria Rilke asserted the divinity of art with a fierce devotion:

How other, future worlds will ripen to God I do not know, but for us art is the way.

Given the modern scientific agnosticism, it was inevitable that the artist should cease to see himself as a mere pleasure-giver or ornament, and insist that his art was the conscience and the oracle of the era. As Ezra Pound wrote:

Artists are the antennae of the race.

### 3. POETRY REFLECTS THE ERA

The enormous sadness of this breakdown of the role of traditional religion in the world was first felt in Matthew Arnold's DOVER BEACH:

*The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.*

In BEYOND THE ALPS, Robert Lowell expresses the ennui of an entire era:

*I envy the conspicuous  
waste of our grandparents on their grand tours—  
long-haired Victorian sages accepted the universe,  
while breezing on their trust funds through the world.*

Early in the twentieth century, we became aware of an erosion of almost all our traditional social assumptions and assurances. T.S. Eliot published "THE WASTE LAND" in 1922, and Edmund Wilson wrote of it in "AXEL'S CASTLE":

*The terrible dreariness of the great modern cities is the atmosphere in which "The Waste Land" takes place—amidst this dreariness, brief, vivid images emerge, brief pure moments of feeling are distilled; but all about us we are aware of nameless millions performing barren office routines, wearing down their souls in interminable labors of which the products are so sordid and so feeble that they seem almost sadder than their pains. And this Waste Land has another aspect; it is a place not merely of desolation, but of anarchy and doubt. In our post-War world of shattered institutions, strained nerves and bankrupt ideals, life no longer seems serious or coherent—we have no belief in the things we do and consequently we have no heart for them.*

This was after the first world war. After the second world war, the sense of futility and desperation accelerated into larger and larger arenas of meaninglessness. In issue 6 NYQ craft interview, Allen Ginsberg spoke of an apocalyptic awareness as things begin to close in on us:

*As the world slowly draws to its doomy dead ocean conclusion in the 2000th year, it gets harder and harder. You know the Times editorial said that the oceans will be as dead as Lake Erie in the year 2000. It was in the paper today. "Reputable scientific evidence" says that given the present rate of waste, the world's oceans where Leviathan has already been extincted will be dead as Lake Erie. Which is what I was thinking when I was coming here. The poetic precedent for this situation is like Ezekiel and Jeremiah and the Hebrew prophets in the Bible who were warning Babylon against its downfall. Like Eldridge Cleaver is using the Poetics of Jonah. They were talking about the fall of a city, like Babylon, or the fall of a tribe, or cursing out the sins of a nation. But no poets have ever had to confront the destruction of the entire world like we have to. No poet has ever had to confront an editorial in the NY Times that says the oceans will be dead as Lake Erie in the year 2000.*

Today, a younger generation of American poets is bravely trying to rise to the occasion of apocalyptic vision and terror. One young poet, Philip Smith, sees it this way:

it is no coincidence that einstein's  
theory of relativity gave rise to both  
the atomic bomb and a new explosive  
fiction things are moving much faster  
now and the writer though not attempting  
to project into the future will inevitably  
do so if he selects his combinations from  
the present possibilities in the case of  
many new writers the bomb has already  
fallen and the world has become fragmented  
—split with great power and speed like the  
bomb itself

#### 4. MAJOR REVOLUTIONS SINCE 1945

In addition to the major scientific achievements of the past 100 years, there is an overwhelming number of rapid recent changes which have propelled us into our present state of bewilderment. Stephen Spender relates the story of Max Born at the age of 84, who commented that the world had changed more between the date of his birth and today than between the time of Julius Caesar and the date of his birth.

To get some sense of the tremendous number of changes we have experienced since 1945, we might make a list of the major revolutions that have taken place in our own country in the past 25 years:

1. NUCLEAR ENERGY. We can get some idea of the peculiar scope of this new principle, if we simply consider the small dot which is printed in the center of this page:

The dot above is about one million times the size of an atom, and that atom is about one million times the size of its own nucleus. The dot above, then, is about one billion times the size of the nucleus of the atom. Yet within that single nucleus there is sufficient power, if properly programmed, to destroy every living being on the face of our planet.

2. **COLD WAR.** Because of the tremendous menace of thermonuclear energy, we have realised that wars can no longer be won/ nationalism has had to restrain itself from its ultimate expression as territorial aggression / instead there can be only a series of perpetual "police actions", meaningless brush wars which employ a sort of guerilla combat that is unprecedented in savagery and subtlety: jungles are defoliated, cities are sabotaged, peasant crops and villages are annihilated / in the midst of the most advanced technology in the history of the world, our military strategy has been stalemated all the way back to the stone age.
3. **SPACE EXPLORATION.** We have put a man on the moon and taken "space walks", escaping the umbilical of our earth's gravitational pull / in the course of a few short years we have had to see our own home planet as no more than a casual object floating alone in the great ocean of space.
4. **CYBERNETICS.** We have created computers that can program everything from mass transportation to inter-continental ballistic missile systems to extra-planetary exploration / yet we are aware of a corollary danger, that the human personality itself may get lost in its own statistical retrieval systems.
5. **PSYCHOANALYSIS.** We have realised our own psycho-sexual conflicts may affect everything we ever think or do or say / we know now we may not be Aristotle's "rational animal" so much as creatures of our own unrealised dreams, memories and desires / we have more confessional materials at our disposal today than at any time in human history / certain psychedelic catalysts have also opened areas of perception heretofore unexplored.
6. **SEXUAL REVOLUTION.** We have developed birth control pills and other contraceptive devices so effective that sex is taken out of its traditional teleological role of procreation and placed in the area of recreation and self-realisation/social prohibitions are constantly being reconsidered / social roles are in process of continual revision / abortion reform is being legislated in many states / women's lib and gay lib and other liberation movements have forced everyone into a re-examination of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman.

7. EDUCATIONAL REVOLUTION. We are aware of an erosion of our educational system, beginning with breakdown of traditional teacher-student relationship and extending into arid graduate degree program / highest incidence of voluntary drop-outs since we first set up our school systems.
8. COMMUNICATIONS AND TRANSPORTATION. We have undergone subliminal impact of television and other electronic media so completely that we have created an "image-conscious" society / at the same time we have developed high speed transportation so efficient that anyone can go anywhere at any time, and thus we have lost our traditional sense of long distance pilgrimage.
9. PAPERBACK PUBLISHING. We have cut the cost of book manufacturing so radically that classics can be sold on newsstands / there have been more books published in this country since 1945, than at any time during the period from the printing of the Gutenberg Bible to 1945.
10. URBAN CRISIS. We have seen our cities experience the effects of over-population and alienation / race riots / rising crime rate / mental illness at all time high / increased divorce rate / breakdown of traditional family structure / ghetto poverty / proud assertion of emerging ethnic minorities / infringement on civil rights and fear of police state repression to maintain law and order / profiteering drug culture is a synthetic cancer on the body politic.

## 5. THE INDIVIDUAL REALIGNS HIMSELF

All of these great major changes have taken place in our country since 1945, and many of them have been occurring simultaneously. The end result has been an unprecedented bombardment on our sensibilities—and we have been stripped of almost all our intellectual certainties at a time when we needed them most, to withstand the overwhelming velocity of change in our era.

In the midst of so much bewildering change, the individual has felt himself to be threatened in a variety of ways. It is no wonder that in seeking to reclaim his individuality, the contemporary poet has occasionally lapsed into excessive subjectivity or inaccessibility in his own poetry.



When we look at the broad range of contemporary poetry, we can see many of the great major changes appearing again and again as recurrent themes:

1. **BREAKDOWN OF SPACE CONCEPT.** Regionalism in poetry no longer seems to be meaningful as a way of identifying the contemporary poet, nor does his own origin provide him with an adequate idiom or world-view / "who are you?" is no longer answerable in terms of any particular geographic locale, as "I'm from the South" or "I'm from the MidWest" / instead of regional idiom, now the peculiar dialects of different life styles are emerging, like beat or hip or rock or black language.
2. **BREAKDOWN OF TIME CONCEPT.** Because so many of these major changes have been taking place at the same time, the contemporary poet will often try to confront his own sensation of swiftness and simultaneity, or else he will try to recreate the bewildering swirl he feels in his own life / he may no longer choose to use traditional sequential narrative in his work (first A then B then C then D, etc)/instead he may employ stream of consciousness technique which does away with conventional linkages and transitions, leaving large "gaps" or leaps from one term to another, which the reader has to fill in for himself.
3. **BREAKDOWN OF TRADITIONAL LOGIC AND GRAMMAR.** Associational reasoning, first used by Freud in dream analysis, has been taken as a valid way of seeing the real world / chance, randomness, absurdity, and happenings are being substituted for the more traditional syllogistic approach to the representation of perceptions / deliberate experiments with arbitrary line arrangement may characterise this serious search for entirely new principles of form and order.
4. **BREAKDOWN OF GENERALITY.** Because of an increased alienation from most social and political and philosophical systems, the contemporary poet may feel that specific images and concrete details are the only materials he can trust/Platonic notions of "beauty" or "truth" or "justice" may seem to be insincere evasions of the poet's real task, which is to create an extraordinary texture of expression using data from the world of sense.

5. **THE PROBLEM OF SINCERITY IN LOVE.** With a resurgence of personalism in contemporary poetry, with the increasing availability of psycho-sexual confessional materials, and with the individual trying always to reclaim his own threatened sense of self, it seems inevitable that the poet should endlessly challenge his capacity to give and receive love, as the ultimate crisis of personal identity / in a world of accelerating change, the hunger for this one great personal stability has become almost obsessive.

These recurrent themes can be seen at the beginnings of modern poetry. In the CANTOS of Ezra Pound, there is a disembodied voice speaking associationally, carrying on a conversation with itself across great eras of time and space. Historical events occur simultaneously, although thousands of miles and hundreds of years apart. The poet himself is a citizen of no particular place and no particular time. He becomes Odysseus descending into the underworld in Book XI of the ODYSSEY, then he recoils at the carnage of the first world war, then he rants at the stupidity of political leaders, then he admires the wisdom of the dynasties of China, then he enumerates the failure of certain European banking practises, then he tries to retrace the architecture of the casting of the United States Constitution. And so on and so on, in an extraordinary performance of ear and eye. The problem of sincerity in love, even sincerity in self-love is expressed heroically:

What thou lovest well remains,  
the rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee  
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage

In America, one of the first calls for a truly contemporary poetry came from William Carlos Williams, who insisted on specific image and concrete detail—as he put it, "no ideas but in things". Rejecting traditional metrics, Williams described the basic unit of his new poetry as a "variable foot", which is a flexible measure that depends on the individual poet's own ear.

Charles Olson wanted a contemporary American poetry which would be an extension of the creative act itself. In a statement on his own poetics, Olson wrote:

*I want to do two things: first, try to show what projective or OPEN verse is, what it involves, in its act of composition, how, in distinction from the non-projective, it is accomplished; and II, suggest a few ideas about what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what that stance does, both to the poet and to his reader.*

Olson went on to describe the kinetics of this new poetry, its on-going character, how a poem had to be the spontaneous representation of the energy of the poet's own original impulse.

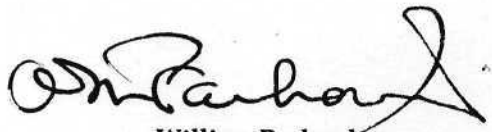
This revolutionary new poetry was not the only breakthrough in contemporary American art. As Martin Duberman writes in **BLACK MOUNTAIN: AN EXPLORATION IN COMMUNITY**:

*Olson's wasn't a one-man effort—either at Black Mountain or in relation to the larger culture. The determination to break the hold of previously accepted models in behavior and art, the outcry against penury and politesse—and the attendant épatez-frenzy—was emerging in various places and in many "disciplines" during the early fifties: in San Francisco and New York as well as Black Mountain, with Jackson Pollack and Franz Kline in painting, Cage in music, Cunningham in dance, Ginsberg and Kerouac in writing. There was a search on simultaneous fronts for the personal voice, for the immediate impulse and its energy, for the recognition of (even surrender to) process, to the elements of randomness, whimsy, play, self-sabotage. Those elements are hardly new in the arts, but had recently gone either unrecognized or been dismissed as peripheral by the dominant formalist criticism that emphasized product, the order brought out of "chaos", the fidelity to established forms—the "statement", not the struggle that produced it.*

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The bewildering range and diversity of styles in contemporary poetry may be a reflection of the breakdown of almost all of our traditional assumptions and assurances. Or it may be that the contemporary poet is seeking to reclaim his own threatened sense of individuation, searching for his own inimitable way of saying something. Or it may be that the poet is seriously experimenting with chance and randomness in order to explore entirely new energy principles which are at work in our universe.

But behind all of these possibilities there is a more compelling one, which is the contemporary poet trying to define his own role as Orphic priest in an agnostic world, as a bewildered and godforsaken people feel themselves accelerating headlong to apocalypse.

  
William Packard

