

'FALLEN
FROM THE
SYMBOLED
WORLD'

Precedents for the New Formalism

Wyatt Prunty

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Precedents for the New Formalism

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Introduction

This is a book whose chapters might well be read in reverse order. Evidence and conviction tend toward tautology anyway. Like the Janus of doorways, bridges, and gates, or the two-faced royalties on cards, sequence is encountered in terms of before and after, passed or played. But before and after are silences that we sound by filling what Martin Heidegger would call the threshold of similitude. Discoveries are made by likening, not by causal reasoning applied to sequence, which, although unavoidable, is a demonstration of relations we already apprehend.

What Heidegger means by “the will as venture” contemporary poets have done by applying tropes to experience. They have pivoted on their own perspectives, freeing themselves from what, in the same sentence, Heidegger calls “the will to power.” One way to think about what Heidegger means when he distinguishes between these two shapes for the will is to recall the old distinction between power, which is renewable, and force, which is self-exhausting. Ventured, the will renews itself by uncovering relations; thus, to Heidegger’s way of thinking, venture is where real power is found. When, instead, the will is intent on possessing power, it actually resorts to force and loses itself in a retentiveness that denies the time in which it wills. Some tropes equate and thus are retentive; others only liken and thus venture relation.

As they have moved away from the tenets of modernism, poets writing since World War II have achieved a distance between their poetry and that of their immediate predecessors similar to Roman Jakobson’s differentiation between romanticism and realism. For Jakobson metaphor prevails with romanticism, whereas metonymy characterizes realism. Of course, the gap between modern and contemporary poets is different and occupies its own ter-

ritory. It does not rest along the borders of romanticism and realism. In fact, these two "isms" still thrive among the diverse offerings of contemporary poetry.

To further complicate things, in many ways much of contemporary poetry also retains modernist features. One hallmark of modernism, experimentation, continues happily, though perhaps with fewer permanent discoveries. Discontinuity, alienation, and despair, all of which we associate with modernism, are descriptions still applicable to poetry today. The reliability, even the reality, of the objective world is still questioned. Disillusionment and inwardness continue to characterize much contemporary poetry. In a way that is different yet still manages to repeat the older generation's maneuver, poets today question the tradition much the way their modernist elders questioned history and the society that history recorded. And contemporary poetry is not set apart by its verse, whether formal or free. The choice between formal and free verse is an option that began with modernist rather than contemporary poets.

The shift that distinguishes contemporary from modern poetry is not an exchange of romanticism for realism or metaphor for metonymy but the replacement of symbol and allegory with simile-like tropes. It is an exchange of the presuppositions behind symbol and allegory for a more skeptical understanding that, other than by taking doubt as its starting point, has no presuppositions and thus builds relation from the ground up. Simile, metonymy, synecdoche, mimicry, and metaphor that is characterized by slippage avoid the overhead of symbol and allegory, whose economies are restricted by the requirements of equivalence. Doubt destroys equivalence, but it leaves the less extensional tropes free to bend and deflect experience as they constitute relation through likening.

By "less extensional" I mean those tropes that are more connotative than denotative, tropes that liken things rather than urge correspondence or equivalence. When Allen Tate wrote the reminiscence "On the Death of Ransom" for the *Sewanee Review* (82, no. 4 [1974]), he observed that the New Critical term *tension*, as it was associated with him, owed its origin to *extension* and *intension*. Describing tension as "a pseudo-erudite pun," Tate explained that by removing the prefixes of the two philosophical terms he arrived at something "derived from both, and

containing both." Tate linked intension with connotation or, in John Crowe Ransom's parlance, *texture*, and he matched extension with denotation—"or Ransom's *structure*—provided, of course, that the objects denoted are in an acceptable syntactical relation." What I wish to discuss are the reasons why younger poets following the generation of T. S. Eliot, Tate, Ransom, Yvor Winters, and others so often opted for the connotative half of what tension represented and avoided the denotative half. Avoiding the denotation and equivalence made possible by symbol and allegory, the younger generation of poets chose more associational modes. Yet they frequently, and sometimes curiously, turned to realism. The factualness we expect from realism, which in itself can create a sense of denotation and precision, somehow joined with the connotative powers of less extensional tropes, those that offered intension at the expense of the previously equally valued extension. The generation of poets who came into maturity after World War II employed doubt and similitude, and these were compatible with the connotative intension and texture. Whether or not these poets thought about what they were doing in quite these terms, their decisions nevertheless tended to divide tension and to rely on simile-like structures in order to pursue the connotative half of what that term was intended to represent.

The habitat for trope is language. The most dynamic and revolutionary source for the poetry of any period is language. Those contemporary poets who are most skilled verbally have access to the greatest range of similitude for their writing, but we tend to dismiss this in favor of another kind of evidence—in recent years, such episodes as the emergence of the Black Mountain school, confessionalism, prose poetry, concrete poetry, or, to use a term that tries to inflate its own tires at seventy miles an hour, language poetry. Names for literary schools and movements are frequently misleading. The most current of such road signs has been confusingly dubbed the New Formalism, suggesting, first, that the use of poetic form has not been continuous but today is new and, second, that the current formalist effort owes part of its existence to the New Criticism.

There is no real basis for associating these two schools. Nevertheless, what urges comparison is the idea, suggested by the similarity in names, that somehow today's formalists are arid throw-

backs to yesterday's critics, among us by abstraction rather than the living blood of poetry. The vagueness of thought that leads to this association matches that used when people link free verse with progressive politics and formal verse with those readers of the Constitution who are strict constructionists. Robert Bly's description of John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, driving from town to town looking for a jail, comes to mind, as does Diane Wakoski's recent attack on John Hollander for reminding us of the ways we mistake literary fashion for something permanent. (At the time of this writing, the two most recent instances of what seems to have become a mental tic are provided by Carol Muske in the 8 January 1989 *New York Times Book Review* and Greg Kuzma in *Northwest Review* 26, no. 3 [1988].) Ransom, Tate, Hollander, and others are offenders against meliorism. The censorship here usually runs: How can one be so calculating and self-serving as to write a poem that only rhymes and meters? The implication is that since one uses verse, one only writes verse. Unpacked, this line of reasoning, denigrating in one direction and self-flattering in the other, is embarrassing. In both profiles—free and supposedly progressive or formal and supposedly repressive—poetry is not really the issue. The polarization that results from associating poetry and politics in order to flatter one type of poet and criticize another is no more convincing than the skewed analogies on which it rests. It is unfortunate that so far the New Formalists have accepted a name that promises something new at the same time it suggests their tenets are old, that they are only the latest installment of a traditional and thus conservative aesthetic. Doing so obscures the really substantive question for contemporary poetry, which has to do with what tropes poets believe they can use.

What seems salvageable about the label New Formalism is that it provokes reconsideration. This means reading the work of more established but equally formal contemporary poets. Formalism is neither new nor renewed. Our understanding of very recent poetry should begin with a broader view, one that starts with the tropes that appear in the work of poets such as Howard Nemerov, Mona Van Duyn, Anthony Hecht, Robert Pack, Donald Justice, John Hollander, Richard Wilbur, Elizabeth Bishop, X. J. Kennedy, J. V. Cunningham, Edgar Bowers, Robert Pinsky, and numerous others. The work of these poets, which is the focus

of my thinking here about contemporary poetry, teaches us that what actually matters most today, or probably any day, is not formal questions so much as the related issue of which modes of thought poets believe they can use, especially as those modes appear in tropes. The use of form, evident in all of these poets, is an important but secondary matter. Form may force poets to be ingenious and this may lead to discoveries, and a formal device such as rhyme may be constitutive to the degree it clusters words, but tropes are the primary means for making discoveries. Summarizing the current use of form by certain younger poets with a label such as New Formalism seems the best that we can do—for now. A more accurate name, however, would direct our attention to the modes of thought, the means for figuration, used in poetry by a large and distinguished group of contemporary poets, ranging in age from thirty to seventy. And this, of course, would carry with it a consideration of the presuppositions that influence poets in selecting not only their means for writing poems but also their subject matter.

As I suggested earlier, our understanding of what contemporary poets have been doing inclines toward stories that recount and predict movements, offering us sequence (beginning, middle, end), but this approach generalizes our understanding. In many ways the changes that have occurred in poetry over the last forty years have been the result of an increased skepticism about meaning. As Howard Nemerov says of himself in "The Loon's Cry," we are "fallen from / The symbolized world." But language is often self-sealing; articulating doubt can be the first step back to knowing. What we hold off becomes near; what we hold near becomes distant. Trope is where we do both of these. It allows us to pivot on any situation, and by doing so we apply torsions to ourselves and to our surroundings in order to uncover new relations. This is a process more basic and pervasive than any single literary movement is apt to recognize.

In 1986 Harper and Row published the anthology *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, which was graced with a foreword by Richard Wilbur. The anthology's purpose, as defined in its introduction by editors Philip Dacey and David Jauss, was not to place formal verse above free verse but to make the case that today the "strongest poetry" is "written . . .

when all options, formal and free, are open to the poet." I have no quarrel with this peacemaking argument, but while Dacey and Jauss are busy mediating between two movements and the various ways forms, designed either for freedom or restraint, have been successfully employed by contemporary poets, they overlook a much more fundamental issue. Their discussion of forms—how poets disguise, graft, and truncate them—proceeds at a remove from the real issue for contemporary poetry: trope. Here, as elsewhere, the debate over free versus formal verse is marred by a kind of literal-mindedness that often unites with the oppositional reasoning of those who see themselves as revolutionaries or counterrevolutionaries battling one establishment or another. This kind of reasoning has been applied to physical matters, leaving unexamined the likening process provided by poetic language, which is the real justification for poetry. I have in mind the simile-like figures employed by Nemerov, Hecht, Wilbur, Van Duyn, Hollander, Pack, Bishop, Justice, and others. But first are the changes Robert Lowell initiated.

Several of the traits that characterize Robert Lowell's later poetry exemplify important modes for likening employed by his generation. Sometimes they also demonstrate the constraints that accompanied a younger generation's break with the modernists. Because of Lowell's early success as a young modernist and later success with poetry that diverged from modernist norms, his career is representative of a substantial segment of a younger generation of poets who distanced themselves from the tenets of their modernist elders. For Lowell, change in his writing was the result of various changes in his life that occurred around the time he was completing *The Mills of the Kavanaghs* (1951): mental difficulties, divorce, the death of his parents, the outcome of World War II—and the aggregate of all of these, namely, his loss of religious faith and departure from the Catholic church. The consensus is that in Lowell's poetry a major change occurred with the publication of *Life Studies* (1959). Actually that change was evident years before, between the first appearance of "The Mills of the Kavanaghs" as the lead piece in the *Kenyon Review* (1951) and several months later, when it appeared in much revised form (purged of most of its allusions to Catholicism and relying on causal rea-

soning and narration for its convincingness) as the title poem in *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*.

There is something particularly important about the change in Lowell's work. Lowell's revised understanding of his poetry now seems to have been representative of a general increase in skepticism during the fifties and sixties about institutions and traditional structures of meaning. The confessional mode and the realistic detail used to substantiate that mode found maturity in *Life Studies*. And the latter influenced poets and critics alike. Agreement about Lowell's career and the accuracy of his skeptical view of things has been general. But agreement is static. Poetry never rests with consensus. Thinking again about the reasons Lowell made changes in his poetry can help us evaluate the rate of exchange used by a group of younger poets intent on their new currency. Along with the valuation of Lowell's much-examined career, the implicit question of consensus itself, about Lowell and others of his generation, can be addressed in an indirect way—not so much to revise the basic facts as to reconsider why certain modes of thought used by poets writing after World War II were preferred to those used by the modernists, why similitude tended to replace equivalence, and what the gains and losses were in this exchange.

Comparing certain modes of thought that appear in Lowell's poetry with phenomenological methods provides some insight into the factualness that characterizes Lowell's later poetry, its success by realism. A phenomenologist might ask, To what extent does realism actually contribute new knowledge, and to what extent does it appeal to the preconceptions held by readers who are thus able to re-cognize as *real* the things described by the poems they read? That is, To what extent can realism itself lead to one more exercise in consensus? This question is certainly not settled by a consideration of Lowell. But because of his position he offers a good place to start asking it. In order to think about what might be the implications of some aspects of contemporary poetic thought, I compare the systematic minimalism of Edmund Husserl's method in his *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* with the factualism of Lowell's method, which began with the second version of "The Mills of the Kavanaughs." I only intend for my borrowings from Husserl to operate suggestively. Trying to

match too precisely the similarities between Lowell's poetic ruminations and Husserl's philosophical questioning would mean ignoring the gap between two very different ways of thinking. My purpose is not to urge conclusive equations but to think about the way doubt in its more recent manifestations inhibits some modes of thought while it encourages others.

Because of the skepticism of Lowell's later poetry, its central concern became authority. On what could Lowell base the truth claims for his poetry? The personalism of confession? Restricting much of the poet's intellectual experience to personalism, which often resulted in a use of imagery that in its minimalism shared a great deal with phenomenological methods? The example of Lowell dramatizes the difficulties faced by a generation of poets skeptical about the tradition's ability to represent truth. This distinguished them from their modernist elders. Both generations inherited the Cartesian predicament. But for the younger poets writing in the wake of World War II, the terms seemed to have narrowed even more. Yet this led to its own paradox. Employing certain tropes, doubt could mean *more* as well as *less*.

Degrees of constriction that accompanied doubt are what we see so clearly today. The late modern, or postmodern, poets sound sadly belated even as we try to identify just where their generation fits. Certainly part of their situation is that doubt seems to have denied poets the ability to accept hierarchical structures embedded in the tradition. Individual talents have rebelled, as a kind of personalized realism has replaced certain modernist modes. But this has not been a solely negative result. As with simile-like structures, personalism remains relational. An individual is a father, mother, son, daughter, and so forth. By likening the self to others, an individual balances the differing/subjective/autobiographical self with the likening/objective/biographical self. Generations that rebel always exist relationally to what has gone before, as they do to what will follow. They exist more as turns, therefore, than they do as breaks with the past, or the future. Lineage is crooked but not discontinuous. Thus while the apparent magnification of doubt did lead to a kind of minimalist realism among many poets writing after World War II, it also had a very positive aspect, the objectivity of experience—a modernist ideal that also was Husserl's

goal, even as in all three cases the grounding for objective experience remained radically subjective.

In the middle of section eight of his "First Meditation" of *Cartesian Meditations*, a section he calls "*The ego cogito as transcendental subjectivity*," Husserl addresses his wish to have the "reflective Ego's abstention from position-takings." His idea of a "phenomenological epoché," or of having means for "parenthesizing" the "Objective world," is not intended to exclude the world but to "gain possession of something," and that something is one's "pure living, with all the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything meant in them." The epoché is a "radical and universal method by which" Husserl says he can "apprehend [him]self purely: as Ego, and with [his] own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for [him] and is precisely as it is for [him]." The similarity between the state Husserl describes and the way the imagination works in poetry rests with the ways both processes are intended to objectify experience that nevertheless begins within subjective terms.

In his introduction to *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, Robert C. Solomon summarizes Husserl's project as "purity of description," a method for objectivity. Experience is bracketed, or parenthesized, for the sake of clarity. According to Solomon, Husserl is after two things: the "essences that are the key to [his] analysis of necessary truth" and "the object described by phenomenology . . . the phenomenon, or intentional object of experience." In Lowell's influential case, the problem of consciousness and the object of consciousness enjoyed similar venue. Lowell's poetic imagination worked similarly to the three-part ego described by Husserl in *Cartesian Meditations*. Husserl's division requires experiencing, transcendental, and eidetic egos, whereas Lowell's falls into the categories of experiencing, remembering, and imagining selves. Husserl's process ends with a fine-tuned consciousness; Lowell's, with a realistic poem. Among Lowell's contemporaries, the substitution for impersonalism and the tradition with personalism and experience seems in large part the result of increased skepticism about language and the tradition on the part of a group of poets who followed the modernists. Lowell and many others of his generation used their poetry to achieve a kind of realism that would