1973

Eyes on the branches: poems, and an essay on contemporary poetry

Richard Cass
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/seniorscholars

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Colby College theses are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/seniorscholars/44

This Senior Scholars Paper (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Scholar Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
/Eyes on the Branches/

poems and an essay on contemporary poetry

by

Richard Cass

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Senior Scholars Program.

Colby College.

Tutor: [Signature]

Chairman, Department of English: [Signature]

Reader: [Signature]

Chairman, Committee on Senior Scholars: [Signature]
Abstract

The thirty poems collected here were written during 1972-1973. They begin as rather imagistic pieces, but the imagist tendencies are tempered with a preoccupation with the process of emotion. The poems progress through a middle period of finding a poetic voice by combining elements of other styles with the stylistic tendencies that rise out of myself. The subject matter is deliberately varied. The poems emerge, in the last few pieces, as the beginnings of a voice which combines a preoccupation with man in the unity of the world, the state of the natural world and the nature of its retaliation for what has been done to it, and an interest in the mythologies of earlier cultures.

The essay sketches the outline of a view of the poet's place in society, now and in the future. It shows some of the tendencies of earlier poetry which have been and are currently exercising influence on truly contemporary poets. The essay deals with Charles Olson's influence on the present state of poetry and with projections of what will occur in poetry in the next ten years due to his and others' influence. It depicts a broadening of the poet's subject matter to include all of the natural world and all the human cultures at all times and in all places. In addition, the essay explores the current flourish of the study of mythology and its uses in poetry. Bly's theory of "leaping poetry" is explored as a tendency of the contemporary poet to immerse himself in the flow of his imagination. The essay ends with a projection of all these tendencies into a view of the poet as the inter-
mediary between the people of a society and the leaders of that society.
Aubade

Morning breaks unwillingly,
reveals a silence
incompatible with light:

Cold light through the window
limns the wicker chair,
rocking morosely by the table.

The flies so sluggish
One can pinch their wings
and flick them out.

The woodstove burns low
(the coffee tepid)
Time to turn the gas on.
The time nestles comfortably into folds of people. Warm months or years wrapping soft against a chill of places, their many drowsy layers insulating--one always dies too soon.
Talking to Some Singularly Uninteresting People

The bright leaves chatter
thoughtlessly
in the early morning.
noisy cackle
pushing senses
to a semi-consciousness---
cup of coffee finishes
the job.
Done,
the leaves are quieting now,
whispering among themselves
at the back of the real villain
retreating,
the wind
Narcissus

Your kitchen
is beautifully arranged,
with some simple flowers
in the window
and fine-honed utensils
in their racks.

Other kitchens, other beauties;
Your own effort appreciates them.
Hardshell clams
sense the swell
of high tide,
stretch their necks
to test
the flow

Politicians of the ocean,
they always know
which way the tide goes.
For Ezra Pound--Nov. 1, 1972

A hard-edged box
bounded in crystalline lines,
transferred to our eyes as
faultlessly frozen.

A murky chaos---
earth dissolved in cloudy tea
  a cup of which we
all will drink
before we climb the stairs to bed.
Autumn afternoon
like a heap of leaves
created
by a child
whirls and crackles.

Sitting on the back steps,
smoke a pipe before dinner---
the wind-blown smoke
of a fiery sunset.
Unlikely possibilities made certain——

a warm wine brook
rolling through a frustrated woods:
smooth caresses for
the eager stones
as if you
had finally acknowledged me

in words.
So quietly,
only the tiny clicks
of the chimes
reflect the energy
coursing through
the opaque atmosphere.

The fog rages in silken confines:
a reaction of mind at an offer of love.
How (much) like a breast
this bare hillock
a mound in a flattened landscape
tinged darker
at the crest
where a tiny clump of clover
struggles toward the sun;
beyond, it falls away, gently,
into the flatlands,
swelling slightly
with her breathing.
Hair plaited
    in a hard crown,
glittering agate eyes
tensed tight mouth spitting
hail
even in greeting.
This coldness would inflame me
    had I never stood with your liteness
in warm Italian sunshine
or run frantically behind you,
    through a dance hall,
your head thrown back, hair wild.

Had I never known you,
    I might have wanted you.
Mary Sees God

Your rosicrucian smile drops gently within me like a carefully aimed pebble.
Two variations for Birds

I.

Occasionally,
on an auspicious day,
you would release
the pigeons
for some exercise
and occasionally,
you would disappear
for several hours,
reappearing east of the sun
as condors,
slavering toward me
with your message.

II.

You choose the vital spot
just below the ribs
unerringly
and with a delicate abandon,
drive your beak in,
home.
You know they're all virgins;
none of them can dance
they pump their pelvises
as if they knew
a fertility god
or two
And the slow dance:
Just hold on and sway
Dip your knee and if she
rubs against it,
you know,
there won't be any tonight
Sail alone for long enough,
your voice will frighten you
and food becomes so much
ballast.

I need islands, cays, canals
but less than I need
a soft voice scraping the hull of my language,
a voice to pump out my hold
of words.

The sea will wait;
right now, I've been away
quite long enough.
Untrained architect
build from few words
a house: sturdy and permanent as
paper in the rain;
people it
with two refined,
well-formed lumps of
sugar.

Make them love
But keep the warm rain falling,
give it all some urgency.
In every pigeon-grey block,
    the promise of a coat
is sweeter
among the scrawny, shivering trees;
    the first hot    crystal
    taste of snow
occurs
without an evergreen or horse-drawn sleigh
in sight.
A white-beard lunatic
    shouts vague obscenities
    from the pit of his corpulent body
    and even worse,
    handing our children presents
    right on the street

We can't even check for the Good Housekeeping Seal!
Who is this fiend?

Succumb, friend--
    you beg the
    hate of your children
and our children, above all,
    must love us.
Clock creaks
  like an old dancer
  stretching;

Ticks of snow
  against the glass

Teapot boils,
  fierce to escape

And I can't even have a cup of tea
  in peace.
Mood Poem

The thick soft sound
of cars on the interstate
blankets the miles of field
and
The night marshes crackle
in frost-cover,
settling down noisily:
in the barn,
the animals hum
within their skins,
sleeping,
gathering their energy.
For Jack Kerouac

The belfry quivers with
    the bells' vibrations
    the censers belch their
    aromatic breath

I am holy, a relic in the nave;
I am an ikon in the Down and out cathedral.
     They celebrate my famine.
I am my own god,
    a genius
    lying on a piss-stained floor,
I finish my poem
    and
    drink the wine.
Song to be Sung to the Mountain  
(after Lew Welch)

Power comes from  

mountain,  
through its humus cover,  
seeds of strength  
burst into receptacle souls,  
roots in central storehouse,  
explodes energy  
through the wispy clouds  
to the bottom of  
the sky  
and power is the mountain
When the poems flow,
each one travels a
tight-fit tunnel
but
it is a journey
with the usual perils:
an attack by bandits
or weakening by hardship
And occasionally, they never arrive.

But the best emerge quickly,
their power enhanced by the
ease
of their journey
Chinese image seen through a small puckered bullet hole of the mind;

Lao Tzu bearing wine jugs out of the thickets through striated snow,

Wu Wei's daughter is to marry the prince of Chou

Shall there be no frogs to croak their approval from the marshes;

Wu Wei is drunk for thirty days and Lao Tzu brings the wine,

The prince of Chou changes his mind
These white months
have spent themselves
in daydreams---
snow spume from
spinning tires
taking us all
Elsewhere,
there is silence
and woodfire,
and poems skulking on
otherwise clean beaches.

We will mount camels
and scrape the sand
for them.

Here in the mountains
there are no more poems.
Dog Shake

Now,
the land throws
snow off its back
as if
shaking water off
after a swim
and scratching itself
with an amiable air,
begin to shed its winter growth:
bulbs poke their delicate snouts
into slightly sunny days

And the world is docile, at least
until the summer comes
to prune and clip
until the trees and hedges squirm with irritation
at being groomed for show like
a yapping poodle.
The blooded stones are of no consequence,
the thickets are only
distracting noise

Roots trip us lightly,
as if they danced

Our attention is only for the trail,
the exquisitely tiny buds
   crushed into the loam
   We sniff only the rancid smell of elk,
   miss the scent of clean resin and
   the must of marshes
   The senses narrowed for the faint
   marks that a dying animal makes,
   we are pulled into murky woods
   the leaves closing out the light.

We turn and follow the river
   to camp,
   having left
   ourselves among the brush.
The Farmers

We quarry omens
    like silver
wresting them from the earth
    to reassure ourselves.
We grind them fine,
    sift the experiences,
cull the nuggets
We strengthen them,
    temper them with ourselves
    to make our utensils,
    tools to turn the fields
    and ready them for seed.
We leave the rest to life.
Winter feeble and compromised,
the occasional flexes of sun demand
the iron for the earth;
we carve clumsily,
without regard for its vitals

The prayers are neglected,
no amends are made
for torn entrails
or the rhythmic breathing
wrenched out of step.

The evening's dark-blood sun is prophecy;
the earth's retaliation will be in kind.
The poet's view of his place in society has been evolving since the time when written and spoken language first appeared in the West. At this moment, we are beginning to come into a new stage of development; the poet's place is changing radically from what it has been recently. Although we are not yet able to form a clear picture of the new stage, the next ten years or so will probably give us a more definite idea of where the evolution stands. Any essay purporting to outline the function of the contemporary poet in society must of necessity be a generalization and a projection of where recent poetic trends will culminate.

It is Charles Olson, I think, who marks the beginning of the truly contemporary period. His theory of projective verse, especially, contributed greatly to a new direction in poetry by outlining an original method of composition.
Before dealing with Olson, though, it seems profitable to discuss some of the poetic traditions of the past upon which the truly contemporary poetry draws.

In earliest times, the shaman was the closest thing to a poet; he was the member of the tribe who was most competent in its language. He used his powers for specific ends: to invoke benevolent forces on behalf of the tribe or to prevent evil forces from making the tribe's life more difficult.

This function, for the most part, carried through the traditions of Greek and Latin poetry; even on into the Middle Ages the poet was the public speaker and historian of a particular group. A prime example of the poet as historian is the bard who told the story of Beowulf; he is a historian in the sense that he has recorded one of the occurrences, mythological or real, of a particular culture. Later in the Middle English period, the poet became a sort of moral narrator, instructing his readers in what he considered the "proper" social mores either through explicit teachings (e.g. John Skelton) or through satire (Chaucer). In a general sense, this tendency carried through in one form or another into the Romantic era; witness Byron's Don Juan. With Wordsworth and Keats, however, the emphasis of the poet's concern shifted to himself; the poet became more apt to attempt to communicate (and in doing so, to universalize) his inner states through his art. The universalization of his feelings is the poet's connection with the rest of society in this era.

This tendency prevails until we reach the symbolist
movement in the late nineteenth century. Here the poet deals with the phenomena of the natural world as symbols of a unity in nature. The poet is an explorer, discovering relationships between the symbols and citing them as evidence of an essential order in the universe.

Following the symbolist movement in the twentieth century is the symbolist period. At this time, the poet becomes more of a depicter and his poems are not concerned with his society very much at all. He uses his poems to form material pictures, which in turn imply a comparison with something and thereby generate an instant of recognition in the reader. The imagist movement, though short-lived in name, seems to have affected the work of William Carlos Williams deeply and, in doing so, affected the entire current generation of poets. In fact, most poetry up to the time when Olson's influence began to make itself felt (late fifties-early sixties) seems formed of two major ingredients: the imagist school of thought and the preoccupation with the self, dating from Wordsworth's time. An example which easily comes to mind is the poetry of Sylvia Plath, especially her later poems. She works with finely wrought, material images, but uses many of them to depict her states of mind. The meld of these two components is not always this clear in other poets but Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke are other examples of a similar combination.

It is Olson who marks the beginning of an epoch where the poet deals (and will deal) with the whole cloth of the
world, past and present, rather than with swatches of human experience isolated in a certain time and in a certain society. Olson's treatment of the world as a unit owes a good deal to Pound who treats many and varied cultures in his Cantos. Where Pound is an external observer, though, Olson is inside the world he deals with. He writes as if he were part of the world rather than an observer.

With Olson, then, the subject of poetry has broadened to include the natural and geographical worlds as well as the world of human experience. The poet uses all things from all cultures, past or present, as possible material for his art. The subject of this essay is the elaboration and enunciation of these ideas which seem to constitute a genuine poetic revolution in process.

---------

As civilization progressed, man seemed to become more self-centered and self-important and less involved with the physical world of nature. One major poetic tendency seems to be redeveloping itself after centuries of disuse; the poet's conception of the world is shifting back to a more ecological view. He tends to see all things (including humans) in their places in an interdependent whole. Man is no longer the center of his (the poet's) world; the poet is regaining the sense of man's being part of nature rather than outside of it and superior to it.

This change in view is most clearly evidenced in the subject matter of much of recent poetry; the realm of subjects
for poetry has broadened to include all of nature, including things of nature which have been hitherto taboo in poetry. For example, Gary Snyder's poem "Song of the View" is an explicit description of the act of physical love. The description does not make the subject evil or sinful in the way earlier poets might in treating this subject. The description does not shock the reader; it is done in an openly joyous tone. Sex is seen as it should be: an act of harmony with nature.

The province of poetry, then, is no longer seen through the narrowness of one man's eye; it is an all-encompassing relationship of man-in-nature and vice-versa. The poet is as likely to write a poem from inside an animal as he is to write one as a human. (e.g. Snyder's Myths and Texts).

The first strong expression of this ecological concept (in recent times) comes from Charles Olson, who is as fine a theorist as he is a poet. He captures the essence of the idea in Causal Mythology, a lecture delivered at Berkeley in 1965: "... I find myself constantly returning to that Earth as though it was as familiar to me as the smallest thing I know..." The world, then, is a unit, not a mass of parts that happen to be together. It works as a whole with all its components (including human) interacting and mutually dependent.

Olson proves his point in his poetry: in the Maximus Poems, for example, he is as likely to draw on tradition and make allusion to early Norse culture as he is to refer to
American Indians or Maya. Gary Snyder, an even more marked example, fuses all of his knowledge of Eastern traditions with his Western background to produce the closest thing to a universal poetry we have.

The goal for a poet, then, is to become a citizen of the world, rather than of a single part of that world. He may live in a single part of the world, but he must be able to assimilate the cultures of the entire world. He can recognize no geographical restrictions. This argument is not to imply that the poet writes about "far-off" places; what he does is incorporate these cultures of the world into himself. Then, in his poetry, he weaves these threads of various cultures toward a coherent representation of the world as a whole. In this sense, he becomes a generalist, rather than a specialist. While this is not exactly a new idea (cf. eighteenth century literature), it does have a coloration that is strictly contemporary. Where eighteenth century writers were concerned with becoming "citizens of the world," they also tended to want to put themselves at an emotional distance from the world. The modern poet, on the other hand, makes himself vulnerable to the world; experience is authentic only if he is directly in the middle of it.

Another difference between earlier and contemporary poets has to do with the question of time; the contemporary poet is even less concerned with restrictions of time than he is with those of geography. He borrows from all phases of
cultures at all times, past and present, and incorporates
them into his picture. To take a less well-known poet as
an example, Nathaniel Tarn is especially adept at this in
The Beautiful Contradictions; he combines elements of ancient
Maya, Buddhism, medieval Christianity, the Kabbala (to name
a few of his diverse sources) and attempts to discover
their interrelationships with man in the world up to the
present time. In this book, he moves over the space of
centuries as easily as he moves through various cultures.

Mythology is another facet of these new poetic dev-
elopments which cannot be ignored; it has become an immensely
important part of modern poetry.

A mythology is an integral part of the culture. It
forms an explanation of the workings of the universe. To
the people of a certain culture, their mythology is truth.
The need to explain is not a necessity of survival, but a
desire prompted by man's unconscious sense of being part of
the natural universe and wanting to define his place in
that order.

This revival of a preoccupation with mythology seems
to have several possible roots. There is, first of all, the
fact that the Christian mythos (which is the major mythology
of the West) is rapidly losing favor. The reasons for its
loss of acceptance are no doubt varied, but a major one
seems to be that Christianity has become linked with an
economic system (i.e. capitalism) which has lost control of
itself and seems to be threatening the extinction of the
natural world. The interior forces of human beings which give them their deepest feelings of being part of the natural world will always triumph over a set of values imposed from without which actively hinder the natural workings of the universe.

Another reason for this new preoccupation may be the ever-increasing scientism and the runaway technology of the last twenty years. The idea of evolution from the sea, or the hypothesis that the earth was formed by the collision of asteroids, will never explain why (or by what agent) the universe came into being. No amount of scientific theory will make people believe that they came about by chance. The "race to space" has destroyed some of our awe for the universe; the moon will never be the same. Mythology romanticizes what, in some cases, is already scientific fact; it also serves to draw attention from rationality to imagination and give the imagination an equal place in the human mind. Mythology deals with the imagination and imagination is the poet's place of business.

Poets today are also delving more deeply into the unconscious, i.e., the unconscious as the source of dreams, visions, and creativity. What comes out of this introspection is what Robert Bly calls "leaping poetry," a poetry of wild associations (but only wild in the sense that they are not logically dissectable). The associations string together on paper as they came out of the mind; they are not rational but have a powerful emotional impact. An example from the poetry of Pablo Neruda will illustrate this point:
A tongue from different eras of time is moving
over the injured iron, over the eyes
of plaster. It's a tail of harsh
horsehair, stone hands stuffed with rage,
and the house colors fall silent and the decisions
of the architecture explode, . . .

Here we can clearly see the poet going into his un-
conscious and following the associations of his imagination.
What is produced is a poetry which depends on intuitive
flashes of understanding by the reader. The reader is forced
to attempt to put himself into the flow of the poet's
imagination. After centuries of deprecation of the imagination,
not to mention outright renunciation of it, it seems that
this kind of poetry can only do good. It will draw readers
back into contemplation of the awesomely colorful and
infinite universe of the unconscious.

It seems that these elements are working in combination
in much of the poetry that is genuinely original. We can-
not consider poetry which imitates earlier poetry as ori-
ginal, since it only carries on repetition of the work of
erlier poets. Olson, Snyder, Lew Welch (who worshipped
Mt. Tamalpais as his personal goddess), Ginsberg and his
Blakean visions, and Bly and his "leaping poetry," are the
sources of all the truly contemporary poets.

What seems certain is that in the next decade or so,
the tendencies described here will come together to form
a clear, forceful, and more universal poetry. The function
of the poet will be similar in many ways to that of the
shaman in early times. He will be, first, the historian, the man who records the developments of culture and society and makes them accessible in a more or less permanent form to the people. Although other media (like movies) can perform this function as well as the poet, the poet's function will be concerned with the people of his society. In addition to historian, he will be their public speaker; in a sense, poetry will again have a useful function— to serve as a persuasive voice for the people of its society.

The direction of the voice will be different, though. Its function will be analoguous to the shaman's mediation between the gods and the people. The leaders of today's cultures are nearly as inaccessible for the people as the gods were for the people in early times. The poet (or the voice) will serve as the intermediary between the people of the society and the leaders. In the words of R. Buckminster Fuller, "The man in the tribe who could use his tongue most fluently to plead with the gods became the priest." It seems that the poet is evolving toward this, drawing on the past and using it in the context of the present and the future; the major difference is that, in the future, he will not be so much the voice of his own tribe (and their own interests) as the voice of the people of the world.
