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# The Problem of Style and the Poetry of the Sixties

Harvey Gross

I pose a problem rich in theoretical implications and hazards. What are the stylistic features of the poetry of the Sixties; do these features, by virtue of certain inner and outer congruities, show more than the chaos and conflict which seem the marks of modernist movements? Can we discover the operation of that frequently mentioned but rarely encountered “unified sensibility”?

Our answers depend on what the examining eye chooses to scrutinize. What theory of history directs the eye to its particular choices? First and obviously our eye seems guided by the mysterious authority of the decade, by that fiction which identifies a change in sensibility—if not a scheduled apocalypse—every ten years. It has long been a convention of cultural history to speak of the decades of the twentieth century as distinct entities. Each of these entities presumably bodies forth significant differences—otherwise why not think in twenty- or forty-year periods? The Twenties, Thirties, Forties, Fifties, Sixties—and now the Seventies—seem to possess a discrete character, a distinguishing *Zeitgeist*. The Twenties were a time of creative excitement and achievement; the Thirties a time of political and ideological frenzy; the Forties a time of war and reevaluation; the Fifties a time of conformity and quiescence; the Sixties apparently returned us to the mood and concerns of the Thirties.

Thinking in decades is an explicit problem in “the criticism of the contemporaneous” and suggests a theory of periodization new to literary history. Such thinking might be termed a contracted millenarianism. The enormous acceleration of the historical process and our persistent anxiety about the future have seemingly reduced the size of historical eras. If it can be shown that the adjacent decades of the Fifties and Sixties exhibit radically different characteristics, we may well wonder whether we can any longer believe in a rational historical process: a sequence of events linked by chronology and causality. Rather, the principle of discontinuity, dominant in the structures of modernist art, has begun to inform our thinking about history. The decades become like the ideograms in Pound’s *Cantos* or the episodes in *The Waste Land*: related not by traditional narrative syntax but by juxtapositions determined by thematic and tonal associations. I mentioned the notion of a scheduled apocalypse. Such a notion waxes and wanes with the climate of events; the end of the world becomes a metaphor for human behavior as it responds to the stresses of unremitting political and social change.

If we isolate a decade and view it as a contracted historical unit, can we discover in its poetry a “period style”? Is ten years enough time to generate a distinct mode of writing verse; does such a period reveal poets who share similar subject matter and employ similar technical conventions? These are hard ques-

tions. The idea of a "period style" sets off grandiose resonances, but it is highly doubtful that we can identify a period style in English poetry much after the eighteenth century. The idea of a period style also suggests acceptance of the Hegelian faith: belief that the World Spirit stamps all the products of an age with its recognizable imprint.

It would be well, in dealing with our decade of the Sixties, to take E. H. Gombrich's advice and seek "The distinction . . . between movements and periods. Hegel saw all periods as movements since they were embodiments of the moving spirit. This spirit, as Hegel taught, manifested itself in a collective, the supra-individual entities of nations or periods."<sup>1</sup> When we treat a circumscribed portion of historical time, a single decade, we can hardly hope to view the Absolute Spirit shaping the nature of reality. We do well if we isolate crosscurrents, spot movements, locate influential individuals. To quote Gombrich again: "I hope and believe cultural history will make progress if it also fixes its attention on the individual human being. Movements, as distinct from periods, are started by people."<sup>2</sup> Thus I emphasize the importance of individual poets, men and women whose work helped to set the stylistic modes of the Sixties. Poets are more likely to be affected by other poets than by mysterious emanations from the *Zeitgeist*.

We seek then the nature of a movement, not the Shaping Spirit of an entire period; the style of individual poets, not a dominating period style. We shall observe, not the operation of a Unified Sensibility,<sup>3</sup> but similar feelings directed toward certain historical events. Style is also subject matter, and in ways both direct and oblique, history enters the poems of the Sixties. History was crucial for poets as it was not during the relatively empty Eisenhower years. The assassinations and riots, the Viet Nam War, the emergence of the New Left and the secular and religious counter-cultures: all had their impact. The very plenitude of striking events drew the poets together. Drawn together, they responded with similar moral gestures, though not with exactly the same political attitudes.

If the Sixties indeed witnessed a movement in poetry, it is necessary to see what distinguished it from the modes and meanings of the Fifties and Forties. From the lofty perch of literary history, it meant a partial repudiation of the First Modernist Revolution. This revolution was the work of Pound and Eliot, and though Eliot has been dislodged as a Master to follow, an influence to be reckoned with, Pound moved to a new and commanding position. Pound's political sins were forgiven or forgotten during a time when college administrators and professors over thirty were routinely called fascists. He appeared as the genuine rebel, the true poet uttering his no in thunder, while Eliot appeared as the quintessential representative of the establishment, droning out "the still sad music

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<sup>1</sup> *In Search of Cultural History* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1969), pp. 35-36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Unity and disunity exist in the eye of the beholder. Such a notion as a prelapsarian Cultural Unity followed by a Fall—the Dissociation of Sensibility—properly belongs to theology rather than to literary criticism.

of senility." Pound symbolized in his person and personality the American Poet: the true heir of Poe, Emerson, and Walt Whitman. What the Sixties demanded was what Pound could offer: a re-assertion of the native line in American poetry. (What is more uniquely American than the *Cantos*? They repudiate both History and Culture in their denial of rational temporal process and in the deliberate anarchy of their form. They are *anti-intellectual* in the most familiar American way.)

The native line in American poetry is grappled to a style that refuses to be encumbered by metrical restraints, that prefers to speak in its own voice, in the unambiguous "I" of the poet who displays his sincerity as publicly as his genitals, and that reaches, often violently, toward a radical vividness in metaphor. These are not, of course, the exclusive characteristics of the style, but they are striking enough to warrant examination. We thus glance briefly at the notable changes in prosody, voice, and metaphor that mark the Sixties.

In the late Forties and Fifties prosody was dominated by metrical discipline; Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, and W. S. Merwin wrote, with great fluency, the classic English meters. The poets writing in the Sixties have largely returned to non-metrical prosodies, the norms of modernist poetry. Two passages may serve to illustrate the direction from the metered verse of the Fifties to the open rhythms of the Sixties. Both are by Merwin: the first from his debut volume *A Mask for Janus* (1952); the second from his recent collection *The Carriers of Ladders* (1973):

We have half-waked to hear the minutes die  
 And heard our minds that, waiting toward the east,  
 Embraced the seed and thought of day, and we  
 Were by the pool of dark the crouched beast.

I thought it was an empty doorway  
 standing there by me  
 and it was you  
 I can see that you stood that way  
 cold as a pillar  
 while they made the stories about you

The fluent dignity of the first passage gives way to rhythmical starkness. The second passage is controlled by what Pound calls "absolute rhythm": where the form of the thought finds its expression not in following an agreed-upon pattern but by reaching out in separate lines and phrases to cut its unique "shape in time."

Voice and metaphor also move toward newer freedoms. Most striking is the general abandonment of the *persona*, the poet speaking through the mask of an invented character. Books that set the tone of the Sixties, Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* (1966), Anne Sexton's *Live or Die* (1966), Merwin's *The Lice* (1967), give us (in Lionel Trilling's words) an ". . . unmediated

exhibition of the self.”<sup>4</sup> This self may be the confessional “I” rehearsing violence, or cursing one’s existence, one’s heritage, one’s parents, or knowing madness and verging on or into suicide. Or the self may be divided (as in Berryman’s 77 *Dream Songs*) among voices who speak ironically, prophetically, demoniacally. But typically the poet speaks out of the immediacy of the situation, directly to the reader. Here Denise Levertov talks about marriage:

Don’t lock me in wedlock, I want  
marriage, an  
encounter—

I told you about the  
green light of  
May . . .

Although the poem opens with a play on words, the poet secures our interest without rhetorical sophistication, metrical complexity, or semantic indirections—irony, paradox, ambiguity. Miss Levertov engages our trust by eschewing those strategies so fervently commended by the New Criticism.

The poet may, with Wordsworthian simplicity, situate himself in a landscape and organize his experience in a language nearly purged of obvious literary qualities. Here is Galway Kinnell lighting a fire in the rain and linking himself to the mysteries of cosmos and existence:

I light  
a small fire in the rain.

The black  
wood reddens, the deathwatches inside  
begin running out of time, I can see  
the dead crossed limbs  
longing again for the universe . . .

In the book from which I have excerpted the above lines, Kinnell appears very much as himself; in several instances he uses his own name to underline the intimacy and drama of particular relationships. Kinnell also revives the familiar form of the romantic lyric in which the poet traces “the drama of consciousness” from immediate sense perception to metaphysical encounter.

If poets in the Sixties displayed simplicity and frankness in dealing with the self and in the transactions of consciousness, they moved toward greater vividness and complexity in their metaphoric constructions. Poems often begin with a succession of brilliant tropes; these lines are by Merwin:

LATE NIGHT IN AUTUMN  
In the hills ahead a pain is moving its light  
through the dark skies of a self  
it is on foot I think  
it is old . . .

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<sup>4</sup> *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 9.

Merwin's very personal combination of personification and synaesthesia represents a deepening of Imagist method. Imagism operated largely on the surface of experience, but Merwin's figures penetrate below the levels of perception to chthonic regions.

Sylvia Plath achieves similar effects but with considerably more violence. Here are some characteristic opening figures from *Ariel*:

A smile fell in the grass.

Irretrievable! . . .

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.

I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children . . .

The engine is killing the track, the track is silver,

It stretches into the distance. It will be eaten nevertheless . . .

We question whether poems beginning at such levels of intensity can successfully sustain themselves. Proceeding from shock to shock without the mediation of neutral material, the poet does not fully control the shape of the argument, modulate the tonalities of feeling, humanize the experience. Articulation is not Sylvia Plath's *forte*; many of her poems leave us amazed and distraught—few leave us satisfied or illuminated. But her techniques of radical metaphor have been vastly influential and widely imitated during the Sixties; her metaphoric quality became a stylistic norm for schools of younger poets.

Open rhythms, the unmediated self, and radical metaphor: do these define the poetic style of the Sixties, or have we made an arbitrary selection of qualities from an arbitrary group of poets? These qualities are not found in all poets writing in the Sixties. A number of poets continued (and still continue) to compose metrically although most discarded the *persona*. Richard Wilbur, that miniaturist of the private sensibility, and John Hollander, that learned virtuoso, write in the great tradition of poets as craftsmen. But most poets in the Sixties discarded what they considered excess technical and strategic ballast. To appear clever in prosody, disguised by another's voice, or overlearned in literary references were marks of inauthenticity. Metaphor, however, remained as the chief instrument of the poetic imagination. The aesthetic norms of Imagism were revived: to arrest the poem in time and fix "the verbal in the visual." Some recent poets push beyond Imagism, searching for surrealist effects, arranging objects in grotesque spatial constructions which recall the nightmare:

The petals of the vagina unfold

like Christopher Columbus

taking off his shoes . . .

How much drugs or the private disorders of the poets affect the structure of metaphor cannot be determined here, but violent synaesthesia, extravagant comparisons, a plethora of dada and surreal images are symptomatic of a pathology: a crossing of the wires of perception.

Does the poetic movement of the Sixties involve a separate generation of writers who came to maturity only during the boundaries of the decade? I would

argue that a generation does not only include exact contemporaries but also spiritual coevals. Three of our previously mentioned poets, Lowell, Kinnell, and Merwin, began their work in the late Forties and Fifties. They changed their styles and "crossed over" into the Sixties. No theory of periodization can insist on exact or symmetrical principles of dating. The Sixties, as a distinct movement, probably began with the publication of Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959); the movement seems to be continuing into the opening years of the Seventies.

We anticipate further changes in poetic style. It has been the hard destiny of the modern poet to struggle not only against unfavorable social and cultural conditions, but against the exhaustion of traditional modes of expression. He has been required to achieve rather than inherit a style. With the acceleration of the historical process, new styles are demanded, formed, and discarded with startling rapidity. It is the equally hard destiny of critical theory to construct an adequate model for the obscure processes of stylistic change, a model that might explain as well as describe. These processes are related to but not directly dependent on social and cultural forces. In some ways modern style anticipates and perhaps prophesies changes in society and culture. The decade preceding 1914 saw a qualitative shift in the stylistic procedures of all the arts. Atonality and polyrhythm in music, abstraction in painting, and the principles of radical discontinuity in literature made a nearly simultaneous appearance. Similarly, Lowell's *Life Studies* and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* were portents of disasters to come. It remains the fascinating task of criticism to work out the connections between an art style and a life style—between the forms of art and the forms of social and cultural reality.