

Announcing the Modern: From Melville to Pound

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Abstract :

The following verses form the second section of an extended sequence written in tribute to and as an exploration of a diverse range of prominent American poets in history--from the mid-nineteenth century to the early-twenty-first century--including here Herman Melville (1819-1891) , Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849) , Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950) , Stephen Crane (1871-1900) , Robert Frost (1874-1963) , Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) , William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972) . Of the verses, some describe or are inspired by a poet's life or work, others directly address a poet, still others speak in the voice of a poet. It is hoped that they will shed light on and stimulate an interest in American poetry.

Key words :

American poetry 19th Century 20th Century Modernity

Herman Melville

His line of sight took him far
out to sea where the ship of state
riding the waves of humanity
follows the monstrous captain of
vengeance and violence, a quandray
inherited by so many generations
on its heels, that now we stand
for nothing less than the haunting
of a ghost republic whose sails
we see in the distance, history

by any other name, a mirage
we keep returning to as some hope
clung to, for a tale of survival
we cannot live without. His White
Whale being the male prerogative
taking us down into the maelstrom
of a futureless present, while the past
festers on, one leg at a time, to hold
a funeral rite for the Easter
that never comes, the West
he saw was going fast
nailed to the mast of Power
run amok, a shell roaming
the bottom of a succumbed to ocean
fathomless not as mystery
but as a story
clamouring to be told:

Beware totality,

lest it total you...

Beware wholeness,

lest it put a hole in you,

or drop you down a hole...

Beware transcendence,

lest it drive you round

the bend...

Beware movements,

lest they forestall

the moment...

Beware brooding,

lest you keep rooting

for the transcendent whole

totality you're not, of

social relations we are.

Edgar Allan Poe

i

Ardent from the start, by desertion
of the father, devotion of the mother,
and the disposition of his art, he rode
the maelstroms of his lonely, cerebral
imagination, detailing its darknesses,
its poverties fallen back upon, countless
departures grasped by the rhythms
of sentences heard, swaying to and fro
between body and soul, day and night,
speech and silence, a tale of woe
lived in reveries of the written word.

ii *The Raven* as crow

The crows bounding from rooftop
to treetop cast black shadows

*

The crow hops
on the rooftop,
pecking at a
persimmon he's put
in the drain spout

*

The guttural caw
issues the new law:
all that's left
make the most of.
So he does, turning right
on schedule to see the crow
looking down at him above
yet another vehicle parked in
the city he's come to occupy
just in time, that space opening
on a fall day absent colors
he would mix by a palette
shared the world over, creation's
cry against the walls closing
in with accelerating speed, ice
by any other name, to affix blame
for this or that transgression all
have made a home in, for justice
appeased, which space shrinks year
by year into his century's flowing maw
hooked by gravity's empirical claw.

*

Hell-lipped into silence mouthfuls at a time,
days and days passing without a word.
What waiting brings is more waiting.
The mind is unstirred. Pick-hoed in the gullies.
Now nobody talks, nobody walks
but the crow on the rooftop, hopping
and skipping under a winter sun, is another

mouth outrun...

*

No mid-wifery, no poetry puffery
No witchery, no wizardry
No history, no mystery
No sexery, no hexery
No buffoonery, no trickery
No goddessery, no goddery
Just this present moment in the belly of the beast:
about your past life I can tell you nothing
except what will be your future is contained in it
the way a crow's cawing contains the crow.

*

The crow knows to flee
at the approach of me,
the way the edge, in
being approached, recedes.

iii

He chewed off faces.
Nothing wrong with that
in his book of horrors.
The debaucher finds well
in his strength
while, unmasked, he contorts
his talent to stay
alive, exposed to the elements
of slander and neglect.

What lay beneath, lay
between the lines of
his stories, never reaching
the bottom of a bottomless
well of gruesome terrors.

*

Poe and Whitman--the latter was indebted to the former, more than he
cared to admit.

*

Yeats thought Poe to be "vulgar and commonplace". But Poe's multi-genre,
macabre storytelling is germane to modern life in the way music is—one
cannot imagine a world without either.

Which bears out the fact that what we conceive of as the future and what
we call the imagination are complementary phenomena—one cannot exist
without the other.

*

The swagger of an American
gives me the heebie-jeebies,
for true genius is of a different
ilk than the rest of us.
But his writing clarifies
the fog for me. The mountain mist
it becomes, and the view past it is
stupendous. Yes, Poe has a leak in a
disturbed mind, it can't be denied.
But his is a genius of a different order

--one that also marks the trail to horror
and madness; who can follow where
he leads, with all the risks involved ?

Like crows' eyes
peering out of the darkness

Edgar Lee Masters

Spoon River talks in my sleep.
Spoon River is my soul to keep...
Anywhere is better than here,
was the lie I told, words mere
shadows of the truth I knew,
for a freshening of the view
I would give, were my vision
whole, and without sub-divisions.
Now the City darkens to my
familiar neighborhood, one I
settle in, in a neighborly fashion,
where each soul I meet, each love
arrayed, would sooner cash in
on the hereafter high above
than what lies down below--
that rivery, pulsating flow
lit by the darkness I judged
to be the world, acknowledged
in a language deep and changed,
like so many tombstones
re-arranged.

Stephen Crane

'A man saw a ball of gold in the sky'

Accomplishments past all honor
are past accomplishment only
in the night, viewed in passing,
where the thrust of its moment
won't hold. But where it holds,
the singing starts, the swinging
to and fro, the swaying as of art
to the beat of the ages beyond
all time save the time you cannot
see--because there is no
time to see--yourself in, the moment
that, in spite of yourself, stops, takes
its measure and is accomplished, turning gold
which today we, yes, we have had
in *his* dance a chance to see.

Robert Frost

i self-portrait (a cento*)

At the outset-- (neither out far
nor in deep) -- came my directive:
provide provide. So by design, by
the mending wall (by the road
not taken ?) I after apple-picking in
mud time (birches much more, like

considerable specks) am meeting and passing,
meeting and passing the gift outright...
(by the road is this load
bond and free, this road of
generations of men) The code ? Be
servant to servants (home burial to
the right person) . A boy's will.
A lone striker. A further range... ?
Come in. The most of it,
yes, all revelation. An answer's assurance ?
I could give all to time.
(Nature, note the
trespass, these stones
of the place.)

(*Lines from and inspired by titles of Frost's poems.)

ii

Led by pleasures principally poetic
which he aimed for and soaked himself in,
he presided over a life which fed his spirit
to the end. What tragedies he met along
the way led to his deepening “lover's quarrel
with the world”, testing his own endurance
in the face of darkneses he found within
and without, and altering the landscapes
he braved—the unknown by any other name.
An Odysseus he was not, however, yet as a San Franciscan
a stranger all the same, in a strange land, New England,
in whose soil was sown the seeds of poems
which grew, past fear, into a forest he could
roam at will, a boy's, while the man toiled.

iii Frost on Wordsworth

It seems they want a conversation
where I want a deposition, a call
to judgment, to wrongs made right
in the face of cruel indifference.
They would converse with night ?
We agree, then, on the wherewithal
required to overcome the silence
at the root of things, before a seed sings.

iv after 'Fire and Ice'

Fire or ice,
both are nice
ways of desire
to be felt,
depending on
the hand one's dealt.
But, rise or fall,
consummation is all.

v

Like a burly cop, the pressure
sits atop your body, insistent
and ready to cuff you, haul
you off to yesterday, stuck
inside there to do your time
in the space of a poem. He knew
his news would travel, though,
which was more than good enough
for him, counting on today for tomorrow

outright, as the manly fate he'd welcome,
court even, poet becoming his myth.

vi

Frost & Heaney. They were not
kind. Their bracing enough
strength was in using their minds.

Robert had Frost for veins…
Mend yourself without him. Back through the purifying
fire…

Wallace Stevens

i

Concurrently flowed the dream in
reality of him who rode the language
bare-backed between the evergreens
into the grove where he woke, the snow
having fallen lightly behind his eyelids
in a wintry sky, grey for being comfortless
and sad, and February bound. Thus sun-
haunted, he prayed in litanies of dazzlement
to no god but his own, elemental lion
between the floorboards of the house of man.

'Money is a kind of poetry'

Business ? You would want
to do business ? This business does not
look you in the eye This business does not
shake your hand This business makes
its profit by shutting you down
This business knows all about what
you're about This business would make a killing
off your death
that you don't even realize
is all you'll ever have
that's yours
and yours alone
that in so many words says--
there's all this clarity
didn't you know didn't you see
it coming through the fog through
waste and insensate searching
but nobody, nobody will know it like you
know it to confirm the laddered ascent up through
the ashes the sooty mire
of the years wiped clean
with your miraculous tears the clarity
whose knowledge appled in silence (and applied in science)
offered in redness and roundness
that no heart hath beat to (save your own)
in the body of your pain your affliction how
does one bear it the telling and retelling of
the story you know is being made up for
you to see clearly what is in store

*out of the nothingness
what is in step across the emptiness
the way what is lost is found to be being
alive being awake here now
where the air has cleared
and the vale, visible again,
takes on the searing view
of energy burned and reused
one word one tune
at a time for the sake O all for the sake
of what you cannot see*

William Carlos Williams

He aspired to the majesties America
made him pay for, the sick rot he rose
up from part and parcel of his vision
generous to a fault, embittered as well,
earth-bound he would remain, the heights
off-limits to one such as he, who made
poetry out of his pact with the New World
shores he stayed on to his dying day,
while Pound, Eliot & H.D. expatriated
to the Old World, its mythic mind they
would re-absorb while he stayed in things,
rooted in the familiar streets and houses
that inhabited his imagination note by
note, a music of local spheres, American
speech by any other name, philosopher
of the plum and the wheelbarrow, his teeth
cut on births and deaths he, as physician,

daily witnessed in neighborhoods of the real,
letting the pure products of America have
their say, upon which so much depends.

*

'No ideas but in things' ?
There are the ten thousand things
that no ideas can equal; yet
with ideas the things themselves
travel for and wide into the world.
Thank god for ideas.

Ezra Pound

i after *Personae*

The I-less wonder selves
up and down the streets of
the Unreal City, finding
what he looks for by closing
his eyes and dreaming up
the sky with all its stars in
full swing. Time settles
debts in his absence and
when he returns, the space
he occupies reveals hours
he didn't know he'd lost,
the days unwinding, oscillating
between who he was and who
he will be, minus

the instantaneous death
he takes along with him
for the ride.

*

Uncle Ez hints
by what he says, of
madness divine, line
by line one can't toe
without, well, risking
losing one's mind.

(That which spans
the centuries in your head,
Ezra-inspired despite the pounding
received, the tempering years
of aftermath, years of attrition,
years of disdain and the pain
of isolation, you enter,
crossing the threshold to meet
Oz, he behind the curtain
of ash.)

ii

Inside D.C.'s St Liz the microscopic giant
fed on the apertures of grief and
unreason, pallid in no gown made
of hope. He twisted the bars so as
to make life a reminiscence, his
muse bartered for daily. Nobody
who visited saw the man whole.

He parted from his personality
and let the stars thickening in the sky
turn a gutted, earth-ridden vision of
History he could inhabit, which took
him to the outermost mysteries and
back again poem by poem, cantos
sung to the accompaniment of selves
radioed and foreign who,
by speaking, would change the world,
though 'Amurika' would have to do,
once read and passed through.

*

Have you pound it out yet, wit man ?
The Poundian pencil crevicing the page
for less is more in a true war of words
where poet-warriors age a sentence
at a time and at a rhyme's notice
paddling link-by-link across Seven Seas
that sailors sing of or try to appease
lest they drown in bloody ink.

iii

Pound played at being poet maudit
and made an impact on the poetry
world still being felt all these years
later, but over-sized ambition for
the poet in society finally did him in.
The dream, however, while it lasted
fed a generation of poets who aspired
with him, to Make It New. This was

in part his gift, but the *polis* he sought
to create was bigger, as were his aims.

*

Literature is news that stays news, he said.
But (as we learn from his life)
what if literature is news
…that stays the noose ?

Upon leaving America's shores for good he gave
a (fascist) salute. …Or was it
upon landing back on Italy's shores ?

*

Yes, Pound became an angry
dead white man long before he died.

But the stars are looking down
And (only for some) he's one of them.

Notes

- 1) Herman Melville is considered one of the great Civil War poets, but is more widely known for his epic novel *Moby Dick*, a touchstone of American literature.
- 2) Edgar Allan Poe's poetry and prose conjured a dark, disruptive Otherness that has haunted the American imagination. He is credited with being a forerunner of genres such as detective fiction, science fiction and horror fiction.

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- 3) Edgar Lee Masters' best-selling book *Spoon River Anthology* consists of poems voiced posthumously by residents of fictional, mid-western small town Spoon River.
- 4) Stephen Crane was an innovative poet, novelist and short story writer who as a literary naturalist or realist influenced 20th-century writers such as Hemingway.
- 5) Robert Frost's homespun, pastoral poems earned him four Pulitzer prizes and an enduring place in American poetry and public life.
- 6) Wallace Stevens, an American poet of philosophical abstraction and sublimity, worked as an insurance company executive in Hartford, Connecticut.
- 7) William Carlos Williams, a lifelong resident of Rutherford, New Jersey, practiced medicine as well as a brand of literary modernism rooted in everyday experience and language.
- 8) Ezra Pound, a widely influential expatriate critic, editor and poet, was arrested for treason in 1945 and would spend twelve years in a Washington, D.C psychiatric hospital. His controversial poetic legacy (*The Cantos*, etc) has come under increasing critical censure for its fascist ideas and anti-Semitism.