

Madness and Magic: Postmodernist Poetics and the Dream

But now and then . . . there begins to expand and resound, along your consciousness, the reflected mural of some sort of unearthly, rapidly passing, eternally springlike thunderstorm—this is *pure* madness, surely the very purest madness!

It is natural to strive for purity.

And so we go right up to the pure essence of poetry. It is disturbing, like the ominous turning of a dozen windmills at the edge of a bare field in a black year of famine.

Boris Pasternak

Imagination consists in expelling from reality several incomplete persons, and then using the magic and subversive powers of desire to bring them back in the form of one entirely satisfying presence. The latter is the inextinguishable, increate real.

René Char

Throughout the history of Western literature the dream and the poem have been seen as somehow companionable, alike for better or worse in their forms and functions. The dream has served as a commonplace metaphor for poetic reverie, as a frame or subject for innumerable poems, even as an analogue for the process of imaginative invention. These relationships seem to originate at the common stem of irrationality from which both dream and poem have been felt to depend; and the principal poetic epistemologies arising from this perceived semblance have depended in turn on the connotations associated with that shared irrationality.

I will be concerned here with two such epistemic systems which, though they are as old as poetry itself, have assumed particular importance in American poetry of the last century, reaching a stage of maximum competition during the last twenty years. This competition seems to derive generally from the fundamental premise of Modern epistemology—i.e., the Cartesian distinction between mind and world, and the consequent dilemma of which is primary—and more particu-

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larly from the Romantic enterprise, which sought, unsuccessfully it seems, to resolve that dilemma poetically. The veiled tension between Coleridge's mentalistic Romanticism and Wordsworth's naturalistic Romanticism may well be, as Charles Altieri suggests, the prototype for the more extreme bifurcations in poetic epistemology that have haunted us deep into the 20th century.¹ Or more recent poets may simply be re-enacting, in a highly entropic form, the conundrum that has plagued poets from the start: i. e., does creative mind dream up worlds, or can it dream itself into worlds that are already there? As with all such enigmas, this one can only be resolved by irrational choice, and it is the connotative patterns associated with each of the two available choices that are of interest to me here.

One of these patterns is essentially negative and is grounded on the assumption that the irrational is situated "inside" as an aberrant and unpredictable aspect of mind, threatening forward from some primitive psychological province which the rational self must at least patrol, at best domesticate.² Plato may not have been the first, but he was the most forthright, and the most influential, spokesman for this conception of the irrational:

He, then, who believes in beautiful things, but neither believes in beauty itself nor is able to follow when someone tries to guide him to the knowledge of it—do you think that his life is a dream or a waking? Just consider. Is not the dream

¹ Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (London: Associated University Presses, 1979).

Altieri makes a distinction between Symbolist and Immanentist modes of poetic invention. In the former mode, which he sees originating with Coleridge, the poet's principal mission is to create orderly universes that resemble, in their elements, the "real worlds" that present themselves, while they transcend them in their self-enclosed ideality. Symbolist compositions are, therefore, artifacts, made things, essentially absent from the ongoing processes of "reality." They are premised on stillness; they begin and end. On the other hand, Immanentist works, which Altieri sees originating with Wordsworth, are premised on flux; they open and close. The poet's mission in this case is not to create worlds but to disclose them. Immanentist compositions are, therefore, ongoing processes which draw the world and reader intimately into their woof and warp. The former, of course, posits mind as dominant over the worlds it creates to inhabit. The latter posits world as the determinant of the spaces mind can traverse.

² I use this term guardedly, of course, as I use the term "positive" later—not meaning to suggest a hierarchy of merit between the two, but simply to indicate the degree of receptivity each system has for things poetic.

state, whether the man is asleep or awake, just this—the mistaking of resemblance for identity?

Suppose, now he who we say opines but does not know should be angry and challenge our statement as not true—can we find any way of soothing him and gently winning him over, without telling him too plainly that he is not in his right mind? *

With these few deft strokes Plato, enamored as he himself so clearly was with the poetics of discourse, fixes a rigid axis through artistic (particularly poetic) visions, dreams, and madness. And before the argument runs its full course, he is forced to banish all poets, as derelicts and purveyors of semblances, from his ideal Republic. Not, of course, because they are unappealing, but because they are, by their advocacy of irrational modes of thought, threats to the common good.

From this point of view, poetry emerges from a dangerously uninhibited mental reservoir. And the abandonment of rational control over such intrusions results in the loss of “identity”—in both a personal and a philosophical sense—along with a diminution of “normal” perceptual contact with the outside world. The irrational, therefore, is associated with absence, disorder, estrangement, and eccentricity which, at their most intense, engender madness in the broadest sense of the word.

The modern version of this attitude toward the irrational is best represented by the lexicon of Freudian metaphors both for the nature of the psychic self and for its relation to history and culture.⁴ For these metaphors place us wholly within the self-reflexive categories of mind for which the dream, and its aesthetic variants, is a mode of

* Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 476c-476e. One can, of course, use the same premises to valorize rather than condemn poetry. John Stuart Mill, for example, idealizes poetry as the supreme repository of the beautiful. The end result is, though, the same. Poetry is declared useless, without practical purpose, essentially escapist. For Plato such escapes are to be avoided because they distract the mind from the real business of life which is its mission; for Mill, they are to be appreciated because they abstract the mind from the real business of life which is its burden.

⁴ Freud's metaphorical alliance with Plato in this regard is probably clearest in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Freud's “civilization” emerges and advances through repressions of the same kinds of appetitive drives that Plato saw as a threat to his Republic.

communication originating entirely within the self and expressing, at several cryptic removes, the self to and for the self. The poetic parallel to this egocentrism is that strain of verbal hermeticism which originated with the Symbolists and proceeded through Eliot to its most recent focus among those American poets loosely classified as “confessional.” In this mode, the poem becomes a very private and self-enclosed expression, a kind of vision which emerges from the hidden inner recesses of the individual mind and which yields up its secrets to a set of critical strategies not essentially dissimilar from the sort that a psychoanalyst applies to a dream.

At the other pole of the Western imagination is a notion of the dream, and its aesthetic variants, as ecstatic or visionary—or, more comprehensively, transcendental—which is grounded on the assumption that the irrational is situated “outside,” disclosing itself as prophetic insight through the physical semblances of nature or the mental semblances of dreams. From this point of view both dream and poem are the metaphoric expressions of some otherworldly spiritual realm; and it is only by abandoning the artifice of reason and dwelling in these proffered semblances that one can allow that world to emerge.

It is principally through Biblical literature that this more positive pattern of connotations enters the cultural mainstream. For, when the focal subject of one's intentions is ineffable, then “resemblances” become the essential currency of discourse. The irrational is, in this mode, associated with presence, divine inspiration, spiritual wholeness, and synthesis, and it functions by a kind of self-abnegation, most often initiated through the contemplation of a reality, like nature, that is not felt to be enclosed in the egoistic self.

The poetic parallel to this transcendentalism, at least for recent American poetry, begins with Whitman and proceeds through the various kinds of objectivism (e.g., Williams's objectivism or Zukofsky's objectism or Olson's projectivism) to its most recent focus among the “deep imagists.” In this mode the poem originates in highly attentive observation of the natural world, initiating a kind of meditative dream which emerges to transform, as if by magic, the mundane into the mysterious, the material into the spiritual.

In both of these realms of the irrational the poem, like the notion of the dream to which it corresponds, is extra-ordinary. It represents that which seems to be but is not, or that which seems not to be but is; a world in either case both of perception and of discourse that we

do not customarily inhabit. In each instance the conflict between inside and outside creates a tension that will seek resolution according to the eccentricity imposed by an initial designation of relative privilege: either things will revolve toward and dissolve into consciousness, outside to inside, or vice-versa.

Though the record of recent poetry is by no means univocal in this regard, the bias of the modern imagination seems to be toward the former of these alternate paths to resolution. In this sense literary history is a reflection of cultural history: the decline of religion and the metaphysical sensibility has been paralleled by the consequent rise of psychology and the analytic sensibility. If we translate spirit into psyche and assume, as depth psychology recommends, that the dream is a product of that otherwise inaccessible realm of the unconscious, certain epistemological consequences are inevitable. Rather than being scattered generously throughout the world of things, the vitality of the dream is dissociated from the natural universe and encapsulated within the mind. Thus the dream falls within the province of subjectivity, on the inside; it is unreal, often dangerously so, in relation to worlds of empirical experience, which can be tested and trusted only as long as the contamination of the inner dream is held in abeyance. The dream, in short, is not real but phantasmagoric, its meaning not literal but symbolic.

Yet, paradoxically, the dream symbols must somehow derive from the world of things. And if the "language" of the dream must be concrete at least to the extent that virtual images retain traces of the concrete things to which they originally referred, then the outside has value to the psyche only in that it can provide it with discrete morphemes for dreaming up itself. Excised piecemeal from the outside and re-arranged according to the needs, wishes and motives of the unconscious, things are cut off from their referential contexts in all but the most tenuous ways. This is the consumptive drive of the unconscious, the inner dreamer, that Freud so fully understood and elaborated.⁵

The poetics which most closely resembles this process of self-

⁵ See especially Chapter VI of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The vocabulary of dream production—condensation, displacement, etc.—suggests the ways in which "reality" is entirely absorbed and transmuted according to the peculiar needs of the unconscious psyche. Dreams are true, and they may be beautiful, but they never are what they appear to be. And they are, as Freud insists, "absolutely egoistic."

enclosed and self-reflexive expression is that of the French Symbolists. One is reminded of Mallarmé's conception of the world as a "brutal mirage," of his simplification of the forests of symbols available from that mirage under the reductive comprehension of the poetic "Idea"; of Baudelaire's claim for the self-sufficiency of poetry; of Rimbaud's "alchemy of the word." In each of these cases, the poem is conceived as a self-sufficient world, ideally insulated from the external universes which supply its raw materials. The imaginative mind, with its own creative intentions, alchemizes resemblances into identities, tames brutal mirages with Ideas.

Eliot's notion of the "objective correlative," that bedrock of Modernist poetics, offers an encapsulated, if distorted, model of this attitude toward the relationship of mind and world:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.⁶

In light of the previous discussion it would seem that the "objectivity" of this "correlative" is deceptive, and that Eliot's objectivism is peculiarly insubstantial. For the primary consequence of this method of poetic composition is to privilege the psyche entirely, to situate it such that it can be tyrannical in its relation to the outside. The psyche, in other words, takes what it needs piece by piece from the world, discards the rest, and then arranges the vocabulary of symbolic objects it has created according to the syntax of its originary emotional needs.

The world then is simply the self-enclosed space of the mind extending, at its fullest, everywhere, displacing, at its strongest, everything in its path. This formula is, of course, reminiscent of the philosophy that captivated Eliot from the start. Like F. H. Bradley's, Eliot's is an objectivism only in reverse.⁷ The psyche, lacking reality, must consume and re-manufacture through language the world it so desperately needs to inhabit. The self "escapes from personality"

⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen Co., Ltd., 1920), p. 100.

⁷ J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), argues for the authentic objectivism of Eliot's poetic. But neither Eliot nor Bradley can, I believe, be considered true objectivists in any epistemologically consistent sense of the word.

by imposing its primal personality on the world. Thus the world is turned outside-in, its absence obscured because its presence is dismissed from the landscape of possibility. Here the ultimate psychological dream is accomplished: a poem for which the manifest content is intentionally rather than unconsciously correlative to the psychic state it is designed to represent.

Like man, this poem "cannot bear too much reality," at least of the sort that remains free from the transmutative powers of the symbol-making psyche. Thus the poem becomes a dream of the self, situated finally and completely on the inside, needing the outside only as an inventory of raw materials which it disassembles into the correlatives necessary to its quest for form. The integrity of the emotion is paramount. It is sustained and presented at the expense of the world.

The psychological poetry for which Eliot stands as the Modernist cornerstone finds its most recent expression among those major poets of the 50's and 60's who have been called "confessional." This term, bothersome as it is in its leveling effects—the inevitable distortionary effect of any rubric—is peculiarly appropriate for capturing the essence of the poetry of madness. It suggests on the one hand a tormenting guilt that demands expression, if not expiation, through an act of confession. This religious connotation is, of course, abridged by a culture in which the priest, long since removed from his privileged capacity as a representative of the forgiving ear of God, has been replaced by the psychoanalyst as listener, interpreter, facilitator for the symbolic expressions of the psyche. The poet works to unravel the inside dream of the self seeking to "be" out of the chaos of outside parts, and the poem represents this process.

The term confession is apt in another important sense: it implies, on the level of poetic discourse, the process of casting forth the expressions of the inner world of the psyche dreaming itself into being by consuming the outside world of things. One can see these tendencies of the poetics of madness in any of the confessional poets—Lowell or Plath, Snodgrass or Sexton. But nowhere are they more evident than in John Berryman's *Dream Songs*.⁸ Here the poet has modelled the poetic process itself according to the phenomenology of the dream in its most purely psychological sense.

For Berryman's Henry, the dream is "a panorama/of the whole

⁸ John Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969). All songs referred to by number in sequence.

mental life;" it resides in the psyche, standing in for rather than infusing the outside world. Henry lives in a stream of hallucination, nightmare, and delusion that is what the dreaming self compels it to be. He imagines what is not there, misses most often what is; the dislocated outside functions only as a medium along which the dream can ground its fantastic eruptions. In song # 29, for example, a fearfully powerful emotion both creates and governs every aspect of Henry's vision. It is a "little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime," or "a grave Sienese face a thousand years/would fail to blur the still profiled reproach of." Like Henry, this nemesis "attends, blind." The pressure of the inner dream is, as it were, so compelling that Henry's attention is riveted utterly inward, reading, recording its images, giving it form. This dream is "so heavy, if he had a hundred years/& more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time/Henry could not make good." He realizes, of course, that he never did "end anyone and hacks her body up," for "nobody is ever missing." Yet even this consolation is captive to the mechanisms of his dream, unable as he is to escape the feeling, the threat, the inner fear that it is so.

Henry's self-enclosed irrationalism deprives him of his sensory connections with the world (song # 8), disrupts the continuity of personal identity, space and time (song # 28), leaves him to "lay in de netting, wild" (song # 5) while the "strangler tree, the dancing mouse/confound his vision" (song # 12). This bizarre psychic landscape is the world Henry inhabits, having absorbed and replaced through unrestrained symbol-making any other reality that might be or have been. "How," Henry asks himself in song # 12, did he "ever come here?" His question is, at least in one way, easy to answer. He came here because after the outside has been devastated there is nowhere left to be but in the torment and turmoil of the inner dream which the unencumbered psyche makes with the materials it has gathered.

Henry in many ways understands this and seeks through the long sequence of dream songs to reinvent an outside that is sturdy and habitable. He makes progress. Yet even in the final poem he still wishes there "were a middle ground between things and the soul." He recognizes, in other words, the value of transcendence but remains trapped in his own peculiar psychic universe, cut off from the outside world of things, which are themselves cut off from the sustenance of the transcendent.

Henry's dream is characteristically confessional in its unrestrained

egocentrism. And its consequence is the poetry of madness that has become so familiar to us. But Berryman's poetic is, as I have been suggesting, counterbalanced among his contemporaries by an equally powerful alternative. This contrary is the poetics of magic, which governs an important part of the American tradition, wherein the dream of the outside results in the poetry of transcendence. Admittedly, the poetics of transcendence was initially grounded in the assumption that the outer dream originated not in the sensory universe but in some metaphysical realm. Thus, while the world of things could function as a locus of spirituality, its role was only mediate, providing access to the voice of an external agency residing in some "heavenly beyond." Dreams then were visions, alternate worlds, prophesies more real than the reality through which they were transmitted because they carried the weight of deistic proclamation.

All such metaphysical frames have been shaken, undermined, called into question, removed in effect from the landscape of possibility. The poet of transcendence now finds himself in the uncomfortable position of knowing that the vision of the dream is given from the outside, but feeling that there is no specific agency capable of such originary acts. The mechanics of transcendence, so simple when they are supported by unquestioned religious faith and an explicit metaphysics, become more problematic when such external support is vague or absent, as it unquestionably is for the poets who concern me here.

Our transcendentalism has become, in short, agnostic. Once ranging broadly over the terrain of the gods, the dream must now reside wholly within the realm of Being. It can, as so much of our recent poetry demonstrates, reside there quite comfortably as long as it maintains the epistemological priorities that characterized its antecedents. It must, that is, respect and sustain the integrity of the outside from which the dream arises. This priority has little, if anything, to do with mechanical representation, description or mimesis. The outside is valued beyond the self because it is ensouled with spiritual vitality. The dream, the poem, is not an assembly of objective correlates but an organism whose mystery is made immanent through things.

The self is held open to the world, becomes actual through its abandonment. The dream is situated within the spaces of mind created at the site of the thing's place in the world. Despite then its apparent origin in the mind of the poet, the dream of the world is actually

taking place (taking *a place*) outside the boundaries of the self. And the poem elaborates the world that is disclosed at that locus of creation. Through attentive consciousness mind abandons itself, at least in terms of its psychological ego-centrism, to the world; it inhabits rather than expropriates that which it cannot be.

Clearly this poetic epistemology is, for us, rooted in Whitman's choice to abdicate his psyche to the outside because it was there that he discovered the dream of himself in the world—not Walt Whitman the man, but Walt Whitman the "kosmos." W. C. Williams made, I believe, a similar choice, which he formulated in the phrase "no ideas but in things." Whereas for Mallarmé, as for Plato, Idea domesticates and informs the mirage, for Williams things are not by any means mirages—they engender the only ideas worth having. Charles Olson also relies on such a leap to enter the "field" that constitutes the "projective" poem. For the projectivist, the poem is an instrument for and a record of the poet's participation in the flux of outside worlds. My principal interest here, though, is with that category of contemporary poetics most often referred to as American surrealism or deep imagism. The term surrealism is potentially hazardous here, reminding us too much of the psychological subjectivism of Dali, or the Dadaists. A more precise term for our purpose might be hyper-realism, for which Francis Ponge can stand as a representative spokesman:

Objects, landscapes, events and people give me much pleasure. They convince me completely. For the simple reason that they don't have to. Their presence, their concrete evidence, their solidity, their three dimensions, their palpable, not-to-be-doubted look, their existence which I am more sure of than my own, their look: "this does not invent itself (but lets itself be seen)," their look: "it is beautiful because I would not have invented it; I would have been incapable of inventing it"; . . . *the variety of things is what actually composes me*. This is what I want to say: I am composed of their variety, which would allow me to exist even in silence. As if I were the place around which they exist. But in relation to only one of them, to each of them in particular, *if I consider one only*, I disappear: it annihilates me.⁹

This radical concession to the world of things initiates the stream of images, real because they find their substance outside the self,

⁹ Francis Ponge, "My Creative Method" (1947-8), trans. Lane Dunlop in *Quarterly Review of Literature*, 15 (1967), 147-8.

which is the poem. Hyper-realism, as I have tried to define it, has entered the contemporary American mainstream primarily through the poems and translations of James Wright and Robert Bly, who found their precedents in the poetry of those Spanish and German surrealists who were indebted, directly or indirectly, to Whitman. The principal difference I am trying to suggest between the poetics of magic and the poetics of madness can be gotten simply by examining James Wright's "A Moral Poem Freely Accepted From Sappho":

I would like to sleep with deer.
 Then she emerges.
 I sleep with both.
 This poem is a deer with a dream in it.
 I have stepped across its rock.
 The three wings coiling out of that black
 stone in my breast
 jut up slashing the other two
 Sides of the sky.
 Let the dead rise.
 Let us two die
 Down with the two deer.
 I believe that love among us
 And those two animals
 Has its place in the
 Brilliance of the sun that is
 More gold than gold,
 And in virtue.¹⁰

The initial metamorphosis of the deer, which doubles into the poet Sappho and then another deer, occurs at the site of the dream which is both "in it... its rock," and in the poet, who carries the same "black stone" in his breast. Out of that black stone coil the "three wings" of poet, lover and deer, brought together in the unanimity of the poem. These wings, like the dream a recurrent image in Wright's poetry, accomplish the transcendence which the gathering of deer, poet and lover at the locus of the outside dream makes possible. They "jut up slashing the other two sides of the sky," releasing the poem into that realm of light where death evaporates and love resides "in the brilliance of the sun that is/More gold than gold."

¹⁰ James Wright, *Collected Poems* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), pp. 212-13.

The ambiguity is modern; the imagery is quite traditional to transcendental meditations. And it is the deer—not, it should be noted, the poet—that stands at the heart of the poem: "This poem is a deer with a dream in it." The deer then is not a symbol; it is simply what it is, fully divested by and through the poetic act of all the significance its presence, when inhabited imaginatively, can hold. The place of the dream is there, where the deer is, outside the poet who merely finds a companionable echo of the same dream in his own breast.

For the psychological poet this poem would be "a dream with a deer in it." That may seem a small difference. But in epistemological terms it is all the difference in the world. The will of the transcendental poet is abandoned, the symbol-making psyche defused, circumvented. The outside is apprehended, inhabited, traversed in all its fullness until the poem is and says the dream of the deer rather than making the deer an objective correlative for the dream of the poet. Inside becomes outside, is outside, is inside-out.

The dialectic of the dream has now come full circle. The psychological poet begins with the presumption of the primacy of the inside which, in its efforts to make a world, expropriates the outside; in creating itself it dissolves the world of things. The psyche, as the site of the dream, is ubiquitous; a new world emerges through the vehicle of the poem. By an opposite inversion the transcendental poet begins with the presumption of the primacy of the outside and in his efforts to formulate a self he distributes outward the spaces of his mind; in creating the outside he dissolves and abandons himself. The world, as the site of the dream, is made whole; a new self emerges though the vehicle of the poem.

Perhaps at no place or time in history has this dual dialectic of poetry been more clearly visible than in America during the 20th century. Whether the argument be framed in terms of culture versus nature, invention versus perception, subject versus object, creation versus disclosure, symbol versus sign, psyche versus soul, absence versus presence, or any one of innumerable other opposing pairs, the root question remains the same: Does mind make the worlds it lives in or live in the worlds it finds? Modern and contemporary poets have responded to this question in their own peculiar ways, relying, as poets always have, on ways of seeing and knowing and making more akin to the dream than to anything else the human mind can imagine.