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Comment

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COMMENT

"On Poets And Poetry," by Grover Smith. *New Mexico Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3 (Autumn 1953), 317-329.

DEAR EDITOR:

This man, Grover Smith, "On Poets And Poetry," in your 1953 Autumn issue. He's a glib one. But because he is a *philosophe* (and not another of the textualists) I take it he ought to be met on the premises of the systematic by which he there judges, out of hand, the work of Hart Crane and W. C. Williams. Nor is it surprising that he also, in his easy article, is more at home, patently, with Yeats, and, by way of Durrell's book, with Hopkins, and Eliot. For I think it can be shown that his strictures on Crane as disordered, and on Williams as equally random, are more of the cultural colonialism (not to be bothered with Smith's academicism) which keeps readers from the advance in discourse which Pound & Williams, and Crane, after his lights, led the rest of us on to.

It is discourse, not just verse. Smith states the convention he is applying:

Raw material is always present; what Crane could not see was that matter must move into form, and that all form, to be recognizable as a new thing, and a thing more than its ingredients, must be shaped in *rational patterns of discourse*. (Italics, mine.)

By this test Smith necessarily is led to his most sweeping parenthesis:

(There is a strong resemblance between the rationale of Pound's *Cantos* and that of Williams' *Patterson*: both suggest a link between the poetry which displays, as in a provincial museum, detached objects, and that which similarly displays discontinuous ideas or ideas connected only tangentially.)

Thus—and slyly—he depresses the whole of the American push to find out an alternative discourse to the inherited one, to the one implicit in the language from Chaucer to Browning, to try, by some other means than "pattern" and the "rational," to cause discourse to cover—as it only ever best can—the real.

And not knowing that it is the sentence (as a "completed thought") which has been under scrutiny and attack for forty years, Smith is led to ask of Williams (I refer to pages 322 and 323):

- (1) images, instead of concepts
- (2) narrative and dramatic power
- (3) "objective vision" (which I take it must echo Eliot's "correlative")
- & (4) that Williams be a pearl inside, without boiling, his own oyster.

Or, as he puts it as of Miss Koch's book on Williams, what Smith expects—what he means by "form"—is "*a simple union between general and particular.*" (Italics, mine.)

I have this difficulty—as anyone has, who practices a trade—to drag up the base of one to confront a judge who clearly backs up on the law in lieu of the duress—the necessities—of the act of trade. To put it all in the mouth, in a few sentences, what is forty years in the works of Pound, Williams, Crane, to be read there, or in whatever years have been one's own. Which is why writers don't bother with Smiths, to expose their ignorances, their smartnesses. And I haven't, except for this one.

But it happens that just this subject of discourse is much on my mind, to say what poets have done in this century, and to track back that very rational system Smith is using—and so many with him—to blind themselves to what is going on, to stay behind, even to go behind to, Reaction.

And it does boil down to how he has it there: "all form . . . must be shaped in rational patterns of discourse." It is the measure which has been. And by it WCW does lose his pearl, the 400 grams, the finest pearl of modern times. Haha.

Let me be short, so you'll publish at least an objection to Smith, so that some readers will know what he does not make clear—that he is imposing old discourse on a group of men who are still working toward a new. And thus finding faults in them which are exactly their virtues. Smith's adjectives—"disordered," "irresponsible," "disintegrated," "random"—"discontinuous ideas"—are a drab's talk.

Exactly narrative and dramatic power is no longer a poet's attention—that is, as such power was from Sophocles to Hardy, or through Yeats or Durrell. And simply because the "general" is not now known, any universal, "Narrative," what it is. Or "Drammer," as the Old Man cried it down.

Or "Image." It should also be noticed that Smith has another sleeper, in his derogation of Williams—that images should emerge as "symbols" in order that there be this objective vision he sets up as success. It doesn't take much thought over Bill's proposition—"Not

in ideas but in things"—to be sure that any of us intend an image as a "thing," never, so far as we know, such a non-animal as symbol. (If there is any clue to what an image is today, Linnaeus—or Agazziz, for that matter—are better informants than all writers other than the handful of Americans who have been at the job, recently: "an insect in its final adult, sexually mature, and usually winged, state.")

Which gets me back to the sentence. And how Grammar, too, ain't what it war. So long as a sentence stayed a "completed thought"—and I'd guess it got that way when the Greeks did impose *idea* (to see) on *act* (*dran*, drama, to act)—it ceased (because ideas are not what we act to, however much we do see afterwards; therefore, form is *before* ideas, Grover boy), the sentence ceased to be the capable animal it now is, and has been for some years, jumping all over the place, and growling (thus WCW's "vernacular," no doubt, dear English) in the works of said poets, Pound, Williams, Crane. And some others.

CHARLES OLSON