II. Il Modernismo transatlantico e i suoi schieramenti

“Epiphany”

JAMES JOYCE (1882-1941)
(From Stephen Hero, 1904-05, Chapter XXV).

He was passing through Eccles’ St one evening, one misty evening, with all these thoughts dancing the dance of unrest in his brain when a trivial incident set him composing some ardent verses which he entitled a “Vilanelle of the Temptress.” A young lady was standing on the steps of one of those brown brick houses which seem the very incarnation of Irish paralysis. A young gentleman was leaning on the rusty railings of the area. Stephen as he passed on his quest heard the following fragment of colloquy out of which he received an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely.

The Young Lady-(drawling discreetly) ... 0, yes ... I was ... at the ... cha ... pel ...

The Young Gentleman- (inaudibly) ... I ... (again inaudibly) ...

I ...

The Young Lady-(softly) ... 0 ... but you’re ... ve ... ry ... wick ...

... ed .

This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments. He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. Cranly questioned the inscrutable dial of the Ballast Office with his no less inscrutable countenance:

–Yes, said Stephen. I will pass it time after time, allude to it, refer to it, catch a glimpse of it. It is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin’s street furniture. Then all at once I see it and I know at once what it is: epiphany.

(Stephen Hero was the early version of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, whose hero is renamed Stephen Dedalus. The Portrait, after serialization in The Egoist from February 1914 to September 1915, was rejected by every publisher in London. Even when The Egoist wanted to publish it in book form, the printers refused to print it. The novel was finally published in New York by Huebsch in December 1916. Pound championed the book since his early reading of the manuscript for The Egoist, gave Joyce much encouragement and corresponded with him, and wrote an enthusiastic review in The Egoist):

EZRA POUND (1885-1972)
(From James Joyce: At Last the Novel Appears, February 1917)

The last few years have seen the gradual shape of a party of intelligence a party not bound by any central doctrine or theory. [...] I would say that James Joyce produces the nearest thing to Flaubertian prose that we have now in English, just as Wyndham Lewis has written a novel which is more like , and more fitly compared with, Dostoievsky than is the work of any of his contemporaries. In like manner Mr. T. S. Eliot comes nearer to filling the place of Jules Laforgue in our generation. (Doing “the nearest thing” need not imply an approach to a standard, from a position inferior.)

Two of these writers have met with all sorts of opposition. If Mr. Eliot probably has not yet encountered very much opposition, it is only because his work is not yet widely known.
Impersonality, Objectivity, Complexity

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)

Essays

To proceed to a more intelligible exposition of the relation of the poet to the past: he can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period. The first course is inadmissible, the second is an important experience of youth, and the third is a pleasant and highly desirable supplement. The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement. Perhaps not even an improvement from the point of view of the psychologist or not to the extent which we imagine; perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery. But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show. […]

Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry. If we attend to the confused cries of the newspaper critics and the susurrus of popular repetition that follows, we shall hear the names of poets in great numbers; if we seek not Blue-book knowledge but the enjoyment of poetry, and ask for a poem, we shall seldom find it. In the last article I tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written. The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. […]

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that “emotion recollected in tranquility” is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquility. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not “recollected,” and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is “tranquil” only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. Of course this is not quite the whole story. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him “personal.” Poetry is not a
turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

(From *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, 1919, 1920)

The poets in question [Metaphysical poets] have, like other poets, various faults. But they were, at best, engaged in the task of trying to find verbal equivalents for states of mind and feeling. And this means both that they are more mature, and that they wear better, than later poets of certainly not less literary ability.

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

(From *The Metaphysical Poets*, 1921)

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. If you examine any of Shakespeare’s more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skillful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife’s death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic “inevitability” lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet’s bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem.

(From *Hamlet and His Problems*, 1919)

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)
From *The Waste Land*

Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis
vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent:
Σεβηλλα τι θελες; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω.

FOR EZRA POUND
il miglior fabbro

1. The Burial of the Dead

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stammt’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
And when we were children, staying at the archduke’s,
My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
One must be so careful these days.

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying ‘Stetson!’
‘You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
‘Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
‘Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,
‘Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!
‘You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!’
(1921, 1922).

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)

Journey of The Magi

‘A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.’
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.
(1927)
A “New Language”: Simplicity versus Complexity

ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)

It should be of the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood-and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last. It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad – the happy-sad blend of the drinking song.
(From The Figure a Poem Makes, 1939)

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS (1883-1963)

Stop a minute to emphasize our own position: It is not that of Mr. Eliot. We are making a modern bolus: That is our somewhat undistinguished burden; profusion, as, we must add in all fairness, against his distinction. His is a few poems beautifully phrased – in his longest effort thirty-five quotations in seven languages. We, let us say, are the Sermons of Lancelot Andrewes from which (in time) some selector will pluck one phrase. Or say, the Upanishad that will contribute a single word! There are summative geniuses like that – they shine. We must value them – the extractors of genius – for what they do: extract. But they are there; we are here. It is not possible for us to imitate them. We are in a different phase – a new language – we are making the mass in which some other later Eliot will dig. We must see our opportunity and increase the hoard others will find to use. We must find our pride in that. We must have the pride, the humility and the thrill in the making. […]

The clearness we must have is first the clarity of knowing what we are doing – what we may do: Make anew – a reexamination of the means – on a fresh – basis. Not at this time an analysis so much as an accumulation. You couldn’t expect us to be as prominent (as read in particular achievements – outstanding single poems). We’re not doing the same thing. We’re not putting the rose, the single rose, in the little glass vase in the window – we’re digging a hole for the tree – and as we dig have disappeared in it.
(From The Poem as a Field of Action, 1948)

WALLACE STEVENS (1879-1955)

Things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions (poems) very often have meanings that differ in nature from the meanings of things that have their origin in reason. They have imaginative or emotional meanings, not rational meanings, and they communicate these meanings to people who are susceptible to imaginative or emotional meanings. They may communicate nothing at all to people who are open only to rational meanings. In short, things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions very often take on a form that is ambiguous or uncertain. It is not possible to attach a single, rational meaning to such things without destroying the imaginative or emotional ambiguity or uncertainty that is inherent in them and that is why poets do not like to explain. That the meanings given by others are sometimes meanings not intended by the poet or that were never present in his mind does not impair them as
meanings. On the inside cover of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony recently issued by Columbia there is a note on the meanings of that work. Bruno Walter, however, says that he never heard Mahler intimate that the symphony had any meanings except the meanings of the music. Does this impair the meanings of the commentators as meanings? Certainly this music had no single meaning which alone was the meaning intended and to which one is bound to penetrate. If it had, what justification could the composer have had for concealing it? The score with its markings contains any meaning that imaginative and sensitive listeners find in it. It takes very little to experience the variety in everything. The poet, the musician, both have explicit meanings but they express them in the forms these take and not in explanation.
(From Poetry and Meaning, 1948)

I think I should select from my poems as my favorite the Emperor of Ice Cream. This wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet seems to me to contain something of the essential gaudiness [gaudy, flashy, garish, loud, meretricious, tawdry] of poetry; that is the reason why I like it.
(To William Rose Benét, Hartford, Conn. 6 January 1933 – From Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and edited by Holly Stevens, New York, Knopf, 1966, p. 263).

WALLACE STEVENS (1879-1955)
The Emperor of Ice-Cream

Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.  
Let be be finale of seem.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.  

Take from the dresser of deal,  
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
On which she embroidered fantails once  
And spread it so as to cover her face.  
If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.  
Let the lamp affix its beam.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.  
(1922)
WALLACE STEVENS (1879-1955)

The Death of a Soldier

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn.
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,
Imposing his separation,
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn,
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
The clouds go, nevertheless,
In their direction.

(1923)

WALLACE STEVENS (1879-1955)

A Postcard from the Volcano

Children picking up our bones
Will never know that these were once
As quick as foxes on the hill;

And that in autumn, when the grapes
Made sharp air sharper by their smell
These had a being, breathing frost;

And least will guess that with our bones
We left much more, left what still is
The look of things, left what we felt

At what we saw. The spring clouds blow
Above the shuttered mansion-house,
Beyond our gate and the windy sky

Cries out a literate despair.
We knew for long the mansion’s look
And what we said of it became

A part of what it is … Children,
Still weaving budded aureoles,
Will speak our speech and never know,

Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming in blank walls,

A dirty house in a gutted world,
A tatter of shadows peaked to white,
Smearred with the gold of the opulent sun.

(1936)
ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)
_Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening_

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
(1923)

_The poet about his poem and his critics: The author’s intention –
Intentional fallacy – Textual explication and the “ulterior meaning” – Affective fallacy – Explication and interpretation_

“[Critics] turn sleep into death – that’s too easy – you can go to sleep without dying … someone has been calling it a death poem, but it isn’t strictly a death poem, is it? not strictly a death poem … There’s a moment in which a poem reaches the point of special meaning, the ulterior meaning … And what was I thinking about? the next thing beyond, the ulterior thing? I won’t tell you!”
(Robert Frost on _Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening_, 1959)

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men’s farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.
(From Ralph Waldo Emerson, _Nature_, Chapter I, 1836)
ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)

Spring Pools

These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
The total sky almost without defect,
And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
And yet not out by any brook or river,
But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
To darken nature and be summer woods –
Let them think twice before they use their powers
To blot out and drink up and sweep away
These flowery waters and these watery flowers
From snow that melted only yesterday.
(1928)

Desert Places

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it – it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less –
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.
(1936)
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS (1883-1963)
The Great Figure

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.
(1921)

Charles Demuth I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold (1928). The painting was inspired by Williams’s poem.
W. H. AUDEN (1907-1973)

Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.
(1938, 1940)
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Massacre of the Innocents (1565-67), Oil on panel, 109.2 x 158.1 cm
Royal Collection, Windsor Castle (Acquired by Charles II from William Frizell in 1662)

The Census at Bethlehem (1566), Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.

Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap (1565), Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.