

## Uncertain Poetries

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# Uncertain Poetries

*Selected Essays on Poets, Poetry and Poetics*

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*For Burt, Henry and Norman, and for Peter,  
for their friendship, for their poetry and their thought.*



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“Notes on Lyric Poetry or At The Muses Tomb” published in the *Chicago Review*.

“Even now poetic men (e.g. Emerson, Lipiner) still seek the limits of knowledge, indeed preferably of skepticism, in order to break free of the spell of logic. They want *uncertainty*, because then the magician, intimations, and the great sentiments become possible again.”

– from *On the Poet* (1875), by FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE



## Preface

Poetry is always about to happen and also about to disappear, to be drowned out by conventional thought, to marginalize itself or to be marginalized by its writers, readers and critics. Lawrence Lipking speaks to this contradiction in *The Life of the Poet*, reminding us that “the poet, especially, must speak with a double voice. A destroyer and a preserver, he cannot be less than the caretaker of language, but cannot be less than original and free. He serves the remains of speech by making them new.”

Any writing about contemporary poetry, then, must also speak with a “double voice,” honoring an articulation which is original and free, one not yet part of *the* tradition but in which tradition can be seen at work. Tradition is a mysterious organism, and our image of it, as I note in “Avant Garde Propellants of the Machine Made of Words,” may involve as much forgetting as remembering. For me, part of the job of commenting on contemporary poetry has been to recover and highlight some of that mysteriousness. The Italian poet Eugenio Montale called his own criticism rhabdomancy, the waving of verbal wands over objects to divine their secrets. I would hope these pieces produce a similar effect for readers, conjuring into a useful visibility the power of certain poets and their poetry and the range of ideas about poetry that constitute the substance of this collection.



A number of themes and currents run through the essays. First, there is no question that the tenor of contemporary civilization is marked by its uncertainty, its hesitant mood on matters both cultural and political.

Poetry, ever sensitive to the nuances of its surroundings, must limn or bode forth the environmental conditions out of which it arises. That poets, those presumed antennae of the race, might be picking up the signals and putting them somehow into the work seems only too obvious.

Thus the essays in this book, dealing with the work of such major figures as Lorca, Rilke, Pound, Stevens, Mallarmé, and Duncan and of more contemporary poets and poetry in the modernist and post-modernist lineage of Pound and Williams, touch on the complex and uncertain nature of twentieth and now twenty-first century poetry and poetics. The work of these poets is explored, not to offer definitive readings but primarily to see how they embody our contemporary skepticism concerning language, representation, and reality and yet manage, sometimes in the same breath, in the same line or stanza, to articulate both affirmation and doubt. Questions of form and meaning are discussed in the essays covering individual poets and their poems as well as in essays which deal with contemporary poetic movements and considerations of the act of writing itself.

The essays on De Chirico's painting *The Uncertainty of the Poet*, on Federico Garcia Lorca's conception of "deep song," and on the relationship of the poetry of Rilke and Pound to the sculptors they were involved with, attempt to show how uncertainty and the relation of a poet to "otherness" or modernist dissociation and alienation are operant across the poetic spectrum. The essays on Pound and Rilke, and on contemporary experimental poetry, explore some of the problems that Pound's legacy and post-structuralist theory have created for the poet.

Almost all of the essays attempt to articulate the strategies which difficulty, ambivalence and uncertainty have forced upon poets and poetics. I try to show, for example, that the uneasy status of all forms of knowledge can make a poet like Robert Duncan yoke a mythic and cosmological past to his own contemporary history. For nearly identical reasons, the poets associated with the Objectivist, such as Lorine Niedecker, Marianne Moore, William Bronk and others, as Hugh Kenner has suggested, reject myth and instead write poetry which tests perception as though the poet *were* a phenomenologist not only of experience but of language itself.

Poetry, as Louis Zukofsky writes, "is precise information on existence." Many of the poets included here have, as with their Imagist and modernist forebears, the urge to treat perception as a kind of honor code, attempting to be precise in their renderings of an objective world.

In "The Objectified Psyche," I discuss the continuities and resistances to this mostly male-dominated tradition of Imagist and Objectivist thought as it relates to the distinctive work of Marianne Moore and Lorine Niedecker.

An equally powerful urge in contemporary poetry is to be profoundly skeptical of perception, to be aware that it too has a subjective and, to use jargon for a moment, constructivist, aspect. The essays on Bronk and Schwerner try to speak to this skepticism. Clearly, perception for a poet like William Bronk is quite problematic. His metaphysical etudes, seemingly rooted in the natural world, are at the same time deceptively structured poetic syllogisms and declarative arguments that ultimately undermine their own premises. In Armand Schwerner's *The Tablets*, the most ancient anxieties of being and language inherited through myth, complicate the whole project of spirituality and of the epic genre. Schwerner filtrates and updates these anxieties through the comic operations and thought processes of the Scholar Translator, a complex, often absurd figure whose hopes and fears closely resemble our own.

"The Poetics of Unspeakability," reflects on the Holocaust's effect on literature, on the difficulty of recuperating poetry in the face of an event that has put the entire question of 'civilization' into the category of the uncertain. Adorno's injunction concerning poetry after the Holocaust, challenged and rejected by contemporary poets, nevertheless throws a shadow over the writing of poetry, making poets aware that beside the mountains of books published since the Second World War lies an even larger pit into which the massacred innocents of Europe and the rest of the world have fallen, are continuing to fall. "Diasporic Poetics" and "Encountering Oppen" are essentially essays on how influences, personal, poetic and cultural, have shaped my own work. "Poetry Without Credentials" comes out of my experience teaching poetry to a wide range of students, an attempt to speak to the anxieties of younger poets starting out and yet, ultimately, as such things end up transforming themselves, into a response to my own concerns as I face the page and a sense of a life lived with poetry.

Essays in the last section of this collection such as "Avant-Garde Propellants of the Machine Made of Words" and "Aspects of Poetics" attempt to articulate more directly to the present activity of contemporary poetry some of the concerns discussed in the earlier writings in the book. In 1987, when, at the MLA conference in San Francisco, I delivered as a lecture a version of "Avant-Garde Propellants of the Machine Made of Words," the poetry scene was a fairly embattled place, and the words

of that essay reflect the war of polemics occurring then. Still, I had hoped to start a discussion, to create what I termed “countercontinuities,” which suggested that there might be a more useful way of thinking about what poets do with the new tools and availabilities at hand. In that spirit, I tender the essay here again. The final essay in this collection, “Notes on Lyric Poetry or At the Muse’s Tomb” is something of a meditation in both prose and poetry on the possibility of the lyric mode.

Finally, the writings collected here are by no means a survey of any sort. They are best looked at as reflections of my pre-disposition or taste in poetry and, *sub rosa*, as an intermittent discussion of the values I find inherent in poetry. With respect to these values, I hope they will be seen by a loyal opposition of other poets not only as arguments but as liminal points of discussion, indirect asides toward some potential opening for rethinking our current modes or ideas about the reading and writing of poetry.

As well, since they are selected from nearly twenty-five years of work, these essays ought to be read as something of an intellectual biography of a working poet. In this last regard, readers should remember that an individual poet’s “canon” is quite different from almost any version of an official one, that what is important for a working poet are those writers with whom he or she is in constant conversation. In a sense then, these essays constitute my side of a dialogue with poets, some of whom are dead, poets that one sees, with all due modesty, as contemporaries with contemporary things in their work and on their minds.

(2004)

# Part I



## The Uncertainty of the Poet

I am here investigating the floating filigree of doubt and fear, that feeling of being on the edge, which often accompanies poetic composition. The governing fiction of the creative act, occurring within the unique dynamics of an encounter with oneself, one's culture and traditions, arrives as a kind of summation or annunciation, a 'truer' moment among our moments writ large across being and culture. We know that the gesture of the pen or the keystroke initiates the beginnings of a poem or novel or essay, a making. But what of that unmaking which the same act engenders, more subtle and hidden, more disguised in the anxiousness or irritability of creation, the unannounced lever of a word or the leap into a strange linguistic rhythm which functions almost as a resistance to the total sense of one's being? This double-sidedness of the literary act is what I wish to explore here.

Writing, the act of writing poetry specifically, may present itself not so much as a choice as a labyrinth. As Joseph Riddel puts it in his discussion of Charles Olson in *Textual Strategies*, "A writer must use the elements of poetry to reenact a moment of 'original research' that cuts through the 'history of accumulated texts'" (214). Poetic language in this sense contains many avenues, many narrow paths and *cul de sacs*. With each word chosen by a writer, what will be written or said next becomes more fixed, more determined, perhaps more arbitrarily controlled by usage or tradition or impulse. What the literary artist experiences is a recognition that he or she has been drawn down a corridor made of words, pulled or birthed into and surrounded by language in all its manifestations. Our entrapment, our sentencing to language terminates, as the poet Paul Celan punned, only in the parole of death.

There is then, in writing, the belongingness of each human experi-

ence not only to the world or to the self but also to language. And thus, in this view, the singular or unique quality of a poem or novel means only that, in comparing it to other works, turnings different from our own have occurred, that in fact it was only through the poem that we have been shown them. Which brings us again to language's labyrinth or maze, to its corners and blind alleys. Contemporary literary theory reminds us that we look at language's labyrinth in two almost fundamentally simple and opposed ways, that is, as being made up of either forms or signs. If for centuries, under the general aspect of the word as sign, language was haunted by the idea of presence, that a word belonged to, that it could restore to consciousness, an object in the world, it is now equally haunted by non-presence, by the Saussurean ruled line which separates signified and signifier and ghosts language not with a world but with other texts. That a word so haunted will be governed not by its relation to the objects it might name but by a design, authorial, cultural, musical.

From the point of view of forms, our labyrinth contains patterns, pre-structurations, language games, self-contained linguistic envelopes. I am referring here to a view resonant with the work of Saussure, Jakobson and some of the language-inclined logical positivists. This view, I believe, is close to the structuralist and post-structuralist positions concerning language.

From the point of view of signs, language, although it is patterned and has form, is yet endlessly combinatory, not because it is self-referential and manipulable, but because signs are constantly trying to pattern the flux of what exists beyond language. The sign, the name, the symbol, the referent, the signified, comprise a family of linguistic usages which can only exist by being predicated on there being something which lies outside language, and yet which language refers to, that induces form and structure. One could call this the Romantic or traditional view of language, or, as Gerard Genette has recently termed it, the idea of language under the aspect of "mimology" which aims to hide (deceitfully?) the irremedial gap between sign and thing.

At the moment in which we engage the word, where we take it upon ourselves to utter or write it, these two views of language must present themselves as nearly incompatible and yet as unavoidably interdependent. Such are the boundary conditions, ones that are now atomic and granular, in the psyche of any writer. Uncertainty lives here first of all, between the game and the sign, between our linguistic selves and a world, the source of the poet's uneasiness.



I was mulling over these two somewhat extreme views of language when I first encountered, in the Tate Galleries of London, in a travelling exhibit on early twentieth century Italian neo-classic art, Giorgio de Chirico's 1913 painting, "The Uncertainty of the Poet."

I must admit that it was the painting's title which first struck me because it seemed, in the moment, to echo the thoughts and confusions I was having. It was not only the permissive and transgressive title, but something itself in the work which seemed to empower me to speak, at least to myself, about poetry. That is, my comments here should be taken not as art criticism but rather as a moment in literary autobiography, in a personal "poetics" invoked by the presence of the painting.

Now this painting, one of de Chirico's so-called "enigma landscapes" contains all the familiar stylistic marks of that painter's work. Here dream and geometry seem to meet in the depopulated, fabulized cityscape reduced to angles, curves and menacing shadows. In the distant background, at the painted horizon, a train with its trailing plume of smoke scurries for the edge of the canvas as though the modern world or—in my imaginings at least—modernity itself were trying to flee the canvas, the scene or siting of art in de Chirico's world.

What constitutes this particular scene of art? As we can see in the de Chirico, the place for art is a wide public area. A space, as with a writer's blank page, which has elicited a demand for art, is in fact an empowering potential, one waiting to be filled by an imaginative act, by a sculpture or monument. The space is a solicitation.

De Chirico answers this solicitation the way a poet might respond to the blank page. In the foreground of this space where art might take place, brought to prominence on a raised area, sit the two central objects of the painting. One is a sculpture, a crude representation of the torso of the Venus de Milo, headless, armless, legless, a good bit squatter and thicker than the original. The other object, also lying on this raised stage, is the torn off branch of a banana tree clustered with bananas. The jagged end of the branch is pressed against the statue's marble thigh. One or two bananas have fallen to this stage and lie apart in the sun casting their own stark shadows. There is no banana tree: some human agency, a person or the painter's imagination, has brought the branch to this place.

So here is art and even signs of life in the work itself, but no one to view this, for the plaza is completely empty. Normally, such a space is

filled by crowds, by orators, by strolling citizens, occasionally by solitary figures, lovers perhaps who decide on an evening rendezvous and are found walking toward each other across the empty vastness as into the face of a destiny. In de Chirico's world, the vacancy of the plaza, the abandonment by people and by many obvious forms of modernity is a key sign of what has befallen art or at least its spirit in his time. Even the childlike irregularities of the lines of perspective add to the feeling of pathos and desertion.

It would be natural to assume that we are to be witnesses to certain oppositions at work, to infer that de Chirico has staged a symbolic struggle. The absence of people in the square and the foregrounding of the pedestal suggest an *agon* within the realm of art between the classical or mythological *isness* of the torso, for instance, and the banality of bananas. To feel perhaps that a 'timeless' art object has been set against the mundane 'natural' fruit, to infer what is transitory or even comic. As well, one can imagine something even more oppositional, a debate between high art and low art given in spacio-symbolic terms, one which brings with it the foreshadowings of the absurd, of the pre-echoes of the surrealist and *dada* movements that will later programmatically invoke juxtapositions such as that of a Venus and a banana.

And yet, one also feels that this juxtaposition is somewhat unreal. Aren't both symbols — the second-hand grotesquery which de Chirico has made of the Venus and the already ironical self-reflexive banana — over-mediated items in the art-repertoire? Possibly, no one is in the plaza because this struggle is boring, is old history, initiated in religious and allegorical paintings and done to death in desacralized nineteenth century still lifes, finally to lie buried under the return of the object world in the luminous work of the Impressionists. Absent religious aura from an object world and the well-painted banana always wins.

Clearly, de Chirico knows this: in the painter's gesture of having banana and Venus touch, the once-oppositional stance of high and low is consciously neutralized, their antagonistic energies dispersed.

For me, the drama of this painting lies elsewhere, in the painting's finish. One notices—in what, temporally, must be one of the final bits of work by the painter on the painting, that almost everything on this canvas—the torso, the bananas, the objects and the backgrounds, are worked with a faint lurid green. This green discolors the marble and browns the yellows of the bananas until the whole picture radiates with a slight vibratory motion of overripeness. The sickly green, unifying the entire painting, weakens the vision we might have had of objects in

conflict, of transmigratory entities bearing away different aspects of the spirit. Instead, we are presented with an arrestment, a spectacle, faintly nauseating, of objects bearing only the category of their own decay. This stasis, accompanied by the absence of human presences, is stifling and oppressive.

I mention nausea; I could also mention its accompanying dread. For here we must remember the great importance that nausea and dread have come to play in the socio-aesthetics of the twentieth century. I am thinking not only of Sartre and the existentialists, of course, but also how one could follow out the emigration of these terms from Kierkegaard through Heidegger, their later modulations as boredom and anomie.

Now the special intelligence of a work which focuses on nausea, on boredom or dis-ease rather than on anger or rage or desire, lies first of all in the apparent fact that these latter emotional states or passions are concerned with the gratifications of the ego. Anger and rage and desire come with a kind of built-in bipolarity, with goals and objects, with reminiscences of a graspable world. They suggest that if something or other were once obtained, achieved or avoided, the emotion which lay behind the effort would now be rendered useless or comical. Nausea and dread, on the other hand, although one wants their surcease, have no such apparent goals in this sense. They seem, biologically at least, more intractable and primary, more banished from will and willing as feeling-states than our day-to-day passions.

De Chirico brings to the fore this nausea or dread by using the lurid green, the bile which washes over the entire canvas and holds every object in the painting's field in that state. He has captured in paint a certain historical moment of stasis in the state of art and (through the permissions of the painting's title and my own sense of the predicament of writing) the state of poetic language. The empty stretches of the plaza (as in his other paintings) are the cups and receptacles of the time of art's passing. The obvious conflicts or prophetic struggles within art, the elevation or degradation of objects, are reduced to a kind of inertia. In fact, what appears to be most "real" in this painting is not conflict but a pathos generated by the fallen condition of art as de Chirico senses it. The painter, and by implication the poet, no longer faces a variety of modes to choose from, high or low, artifice or nature. Instead, there is only disquiet, nausea, uncertainty in the deepest sense, in the self-cancellations of oppositional definitions of what art is to be. Why then (once more re-echoing Holderlin) to be a poet—or painter—at all?

There is at least one step more. It is clear that de Chirico's painting reminds us of the endlessly recursiveness of art history. Of the dead-ended view of thinking of art as being on a treadmill. Yet what seems equally important is the realization that de Chirico has brilliantly played back our own entropy to us, that through the cross-cancelling of the clichéd objects marshalled for the painting, objects we might take as signifying even in their ironic aspect, something else has emerged beyond the pictorial representation of stasis.

Again it is the green. For in using the sickly color which tints these objects, he has actually prevented us from looking at this painting as if it were merely the depiction of the termination of a struggle or as a didactic message.

Instead, we are made to contemplate the art work, its faintly bilious decay and rot, not as something intellectual, but through the agency of our own dis-ease. In this way, de Chirico succeeds, even against the subject matter of the painting, in giving life to the composition beyond the confines of the canvas (a dream implicit in the poet's hope as well for the poem's life beyond the page). It's as though we were asked to view the elements of the painting—to make a contemplation—while subject to the smells and reeks of an upset stomach, *our own*, or of a hospital ward or garbage dump.

In effect, the painting brings us back to a kind of 'before art,' to an artistic ground zero. For isn't it the case that in the movement to confront and relate to our uneasiness, in the maneuver which is something like an organism's attempts to deal with pain, we escape from the confines of the subject of art? Rather than being mired in the fascination of the painting or finding ourselves lost in its beauty or in the intricacies of its forms and arguments, we are delivered to the outside, suddenly reminded again by our dis-ease that our lives are adjacent to art but not enclosed within it. Our dis-ease, in effect, liberates us. Baudelaire, who knew well the boredom and dis-ease I'm writing about, who addressed it directly to the hypocrite reader, puts this idea very well in his poem, "The Consecration." As though he were echoing Meister Eckhart, he writes: "I know that pain is the one nobility/ upon which Hell itself cannot be encroached."

Such psychological pressure, perhaps after lengthy meditation on the matter of painting in a time of the breakup of art, may have had considerable if not oppressive force on de Chirico. Shortly after completing "The Uncertainty of the Poet," he abandoned altogether the modern idiom he had till then cultivated. He then embarked on what must look

to us like a rather retrograde career as a painter, working thereafter in a heavy, highly imitative classicism, making near-copies of Old Masters in museums, a mode well-suited to the Fascist “realism” which Mussolini inspired or demanded from the painters of Italy. In retrospect, this mode of painting looks like a means by which to forswear coming to terms with the visual present about him. Surely, the later paintings were no longer expressive either of an articulation of the present nor of an open vision of the future.



Wallace Stevens in *The Necessary Angel* remarks that “Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers.” He writes as well that both the modern painting and the modern poem are a “horde of destructions.”

De Chirico’s painting appears to obey Stevens’s thought in a curious and powerful way, for the force of the painting is that of repulsion, a decreation of the categories of art, and a move back toward an incarnate “reality,” the world and the body in it. Not by some transport or fascinating simulacrum but by the offices of art disabling such transports, forcing us back onto another ground. The French poet Yves Bonnefoy tells us that the function of a poem ought to be to make us lift our eyes from the page, that a serious work must have the strength to rescue us from Art so that we can reflect on life.

Someone might protest the nature of this discussion: painting is about painting, poems about poems. To which I would reply that, in the first place, de Chirico’s title, as a framing device, insists upon a mediation between the genres of painting and poetry, and that any dialogue between the two requires that the act of reflection break the plane of one genre in order to deliver us to the other. Indeed, we are cleverly entrapped by de Chirico’s uncanny genius, by the endlessly disabusing effects of the totality of the work, one of which, the title, drives the ‘effect’ of paint toward a consideration of language (poetry). In this space, language and paint, which are no longer about themselves alone, are made equally communicable, even if we are unsure what is being said to us.

I must relate this communicability as something personal to myself, for there was in my contemplation of the painting, as I mentioned at the outset, an act of resonance, an almost mystical moment of synes-

thesia when the painting and the feeling of entrapment in the labyrinth of language came to me with the force of one unified significance. And it was then, in the dynamics of the effects arising from de Chirico's entropic playbacks, in my personal take, so to speak, that I could envision uncertainty's claim and attempt to demonstrate how it is active in the poet.

I am here proposing this analogy: in its effects on us, the labyrinth of language, with its forms or signs or its forms *and* signs, can be likened to de Chirico's painting. That is, to be in the labyrinth of language (contemplated as a composition, a 'state of affairs' in the Wittgensteinian sense), to be within this convoluted maze leads us only to dis-ease. There, places of closure or refuge, recourses to fundamentals or groundings, are denied to the poet. They are denied, first of all, because the two views of language, form or sign, are incompatible within the same linguistic space; indeed one is the Venus and one the banana of language practice. And yet, as the writer well knows, one is always caught wavering between the form and the sign, between one's love of a word's play and one's desire to grasp the reality it would name. No matter how one chooses, certainty is denied. For the literary effect of a word is inevitably shadowed by the mundane literalism with which it denotes something not present on the page and not present in the mind of a reader. Every usage borders on the vertiginous, and therefore, as Maurice Blanchot writes, "there comes a moment when the literary man who writes out of loyalty to words writes out of loyalty to dread."

Even if one is at the other extreme, bent only towards form, toward the structural properties of language, thus willing to forsake all else about a word but its music or arrangement, there too, the language labyrinth or composition, undergirded by past usages, reminds us that any self-awareness of a language pattern tends to instantly de-authenticate that pattern. Every bit of textuality (as the French would say) is already written, not under the imprimatur of one's authorship but by history, tradition, the *zeitgeist*.

In effect, our attempts to retreat into sincerity or to advance into formalism (where art becomes the only category) are suddenly impoverished by our memory, our irony and our sense of the artificiality of the categories. What then is left?

I don't know if anything *is* left, unless it be the uncertainty from which a new state of affairs always emerges. In other words, uncertainty has now become the only promise which the activity of writing can guarantee. In this regard, it might well be the first duty of a writer to

resist violently the culture's language games, including a duty to resist the fashionable romance of resistances which is often part of the ongoing mythologizing of one's times. Suddenly, vigilantly, the writer is required to employ a kind of knowing yet willed refusal, one which is still full with the knowledge of art and of language.

In such a knowing refusal, all language, including the discursive or scientific, again becomes completely available. The condition of language privileges no specific usage; this we know from history, from memory, from experience. A poet rejects one discourse in order to pick up another because the ongoing sense or feel of reality prefigured in what is rejected is as stultifying as those painted symbols in the *de Chirico*.

One thinks here of founding historical examples such as Lucretius and Blake. Lucretius, the poet-philosopher of ancient Rome, we remember, in his great poem *De Rerum Natura*, in attempting to rewrite the language of scientific inquiry, actively had to resist the theistic encodings of a world governed by Gods and divinities. To do this, he had to find something which would undermine the metaphoric, animistically inflected pantheon of gods and the supernatural. Lucretius fights "untruth" not with literature but with its antithesis, an almost rational descriptive language. In Blake, by contrast, in a time when a mechanistic scientific world-view predominates in 18th century England, the poet's call is reversed, away from a 'scientific' language and towards an embrace of allegorical invention or new mythologizing because these are the oppositional tools to be used against the heavy rationality being produced in the culture. Lucretius and Blake remind us of the subversive aggressivity of poetry, that the linguistic environment of a poet's specific times, perceived as an entrapping edge or boundary, determines the working tools.



What constitutes poetic uncertainty, poetic lostness? One component, as we have discussed above, is the instability of literary language. This instability applies as well to the languages of our "inner" life, to the rehearsals and operations of memory. Dream, fantasy, reality, these distinctions are blurred in that peculiar symbolic language of the mind formulated first and most clearly by Freud. In the realm of the psyche, words, which were once the self-testimonies of objects, no longer present an inventory of the world; instead, the sign-function of the word

gives up insisting on the masquerade by which it called itself reality. The sign now proffers itself as intermediary between writer and reader, a communion wafer of taste and substance. Rather than raise a mutually definable and 'scientifically' accurate world, the sign engages us in a commentary on our pleasure or pain.

As in the de Chirico where objects threaten to deliquesce their thingness into the liquidity of emotional states, into pathos and despair, words, from the viewpoint of uncertainty, achieve an odd rightness of voice. They speak to us, in Bonnefoy's words, as "the discourse that desire is always constructing," that is, as the witnesses of love, sex, the taste of food, humiliations or a cut finger, outrage at perceived or real injustices.

The poem, whether we are readers or writers, provides phantasmagorical testimony or witnessing of experience, as though the stirring of the language machine were evidence of something unconditioned which at a prior time had entered the quiescence of one's distraction or boredom. We have been lifted above the steady states of our existence. So, in effect, for the purposes of art, the catalog of reality means only that the words by which we name things, in the contexts of other names, pulls secretly and without any clear scientific warrant, on the loose strands of our psyches. Memory (and this was Proust's and Bergson's great discovery or invention) shows that every concretion of language and every name, such as that of the Madeleine, the sweet cookie whose taste creates *Le Temps Perdu*, once uttered, points to or even explodes with a burden of immense meanings. Perhaps all that such a word can do is to remind us that, in order to experience lostness or uncertainty, one has to remember when, whether for an instant or an eternity, something was 'true.'



Let me quote from the poet George Oppen:

The type of mind necessary to the artist—or simply the mind of interest—is touched always by experience, by particulars; cannot remain within dogma, no dogma but this which is not dogma but another and overwhelming force which we speak of or speak of nothing

something like that, maybe in order not to speak of any kind of *correctness* other than awe. (SL, 231)

If I understand Oppen correctly, the poet is caught between a philosophical sense of his or her craft and a religious sense of the mysteriousness of the world. To name means not to appropriate but to invoke, to establish a relationship. Clearly, the discourse of poetry can barely approximate the discourses of the sciences and philosophy and ought not to be confused with them. For these latter philosophical or systematic ways of speaking or writing make as their project the movement toward certainties. The experimental method, the formulation of general theory, the search for the “meaning” of behavior, all have as their goal predictability and classification. Against the quest for certainties, for locking up reality in one particular world view, the poet is caught in the secret knowledge of language, that it speaks not certainties but explores uncertainty, that it is endless and so forswears the gestures of premature closure or easy elegance.

The poet needs, it would seem, to cultivate, at a minimum, a hypersensitivity to the “mythologies” of poetic craft, including those narcotics we call beauty, harmony, symmetry. In this sense, the poet can not afford to be merely a literary figure. His field of activity is the entire language production of the available culture. He must be acquainted with the discursive currents which operate in that culture, which valorize certain modes and denigrate others, which bring to prominence certain kinds of thinking or activities and significantly forget or neglect others. He must see these practices for what they are, not overarching truths (even though they may hold ‘truths’) but forms of rhetoric or ideology.

Indeed, a more complete understanding of rhetoric seems now to be essential to *poesis*, that is, to seeing most forms of thought as seductions. For, as I see it, rhetoric’s functions are at least twofold. In a totalizing or even totalitarian mode, rhetoric tries to build a world, to hold it together as though it were a syllogism. But in a different mode, in the field of dialectics, in Socratic irony, in Bakhtinian dialogics, rhetoric functions to undermine previous conventionality. This is rhetoric which, like de Chirico’s vile greens, tries to drive us away from the entrapments of linguistic logic and toward the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of a world.

Poetry, if it aligns itself with this second function of rhetoric, is essentially bent on deconstructing its own pre-suppositions in order to be open to the uncertainty it had first come to. “The Uncertainty of the Poet,” even as it conveys to us our palpable dis-ease, reminds us that all

completions and all moments of rest or stasis, are only new opportunities for beginnings. The next poem is always the aim of the prior poem, and this is how poetry develops, not by offering us truth upon truth, but by reminding us how truth is always passing into a lie.

(1995)