

So sick
 you couldn't play *Naima*
 so flat we ached
 for song you'd concealed
 with your own blood,
 your diseased liver gave
 out its purity,
 the inflated heart
 pumps out, the tenor kiss,
 tenor love:
a love supreme, a love supreme –
a love supreme, a love supreme –

"Dear John, Dear Coltrane" uses many of the techniques Henderson identifies with the use of black music as a poetic reference: the allusion to song titles (Coltrane's classic composition "Naima"), the use of language from the jazz life ("funky"), quotations from a song ("a love supreme"), the generalized reference to a musical form ("the blues"), the musician as subject (Coltrane), and the incorporation of an emotional response to the music ("so flat we ached / for song you'd concealed"). Finally, the poem incorporates the tonal memory of jazz as a basis of poetic structure. This effect is most clear in a passage like "fuel / the tenor sax cannibal / heart, genitals and sweat," where a memory of the complex rhythms of Coltrane's music helps the reader to experience the highly syncopated rhythm of the lines.

If Coltrane's music enabled Harper to articulate his vision of history, it also helped him to formulate his own poetic style and voice. The alternation of vernacular speech patterns ("Why you so black? . . . Why you so funky?") with more traditionally lyric language reenacts the harmonic and melodic counterpoint of Coltrane's music. At the same time, the use of the call-and-response format echoes the repetition of Coltrane's own refrain; in thematic terms, the call-and-response tradition is linked with the tradition of black music, and, by extension, of African American poetry.

Chapter 7

The New Criticism and poetic formalism

In the early 1920s, a group of brilliant young poets initiated what would become one of the most important movements in twentieth-century American literature: the New Criticism. The oldest of these poets, John Crowe Ransom, had been teaching at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, since 1914. Along with another Vanderbilt instructor, Donald Davidson, as well as undergraduate students Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, Ransom founded a literary magazine, *The Fugitive*. The members of Ransom's circle – who contributed both poetry and critical essays to the magazine – called themselves "Fugitives."

The Fugitives began as a group concerned with producing and publishing good poetry, and their magazine – which ran from 1922 to 1925 – was an important literary publication that included in its pages poems by many of the leading writers of the day. In the course of the decade, however, the focus of the group shifted from the study of poetry to an exploration of the intellectual and artistic problems of Southern writing, and to a still broader examination of the economic and social issues facing the rural South. By 1930 the Fugitives were calling themselves "Southern Agrarians," and were making the argument that the South's distinctiveness lay in a predominantly agricultural society which stood as a bulwark against the industrial materialism and consumerism of the Northern states. *I'll Take My Stand: the South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) was a collection of essays by twelve Southerners, including Ransom, Davidson, Tate, and Warren.

At the same time that they were turning their attention to regional issues, Ransom and the other Fugitives were also leading a movement to legitimize a different kind of criticism from that currently practiced in most English departments in the United States. Influenced by the critical essays of T. S. Eliot and by the books of English critics I. A. Richards and William Empson, Ransom and the other Fugitives increasingly turned their attention to the actual texts of poems instead of the biographical information surrounding their composition. This "close reading" of poetry – often performed by critics who were poets in their own right – was a departure from the kind of historical and philological study that had dominated the field. In 1937

Ransom published an essay entitled "Criticism, Inc.," which argued that literary criticism "must become more scientific . . . precise and systematic." The following year, two of Ransom's former students – Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks – published what would be the single most influential book of the New Critical movement: *Understanding Poetry*. That book, and its companion volumes *Understanding Fiction* and *Understanding Drama*, codified many of the New Critical ideas into a coherent approach to literary study and revolutionized the teaching of literature. Ransom himself published two highly influential volumes of essays – *The World's Body* (1938) and *The New Criticism* (1941) – the latter of which would give the movement its name.

In the 1930s, most of the New Critics left Vanderbilt and spread their ideas to universities across the country: Ransom went to Kenyon College in Ohio and founded *The Kenyon Review*; Warren and Brooks both went to Louisiana State University, where they founded *The Southern Review*; and Tate went on to teach at Princeton, New York University, and the University of Minnesota. The New Critical mode, propelled by influential books of criticism like Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) and W. K. Winsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (1954), would dominate the academic study of poetry until the end of the 1960s. The success of the New Criticism during these years is not difficult to explain: as Terry Eagleton suggests, the New Criticism evolved at a time when American literature programs were struggling to become professionalized, and when the study of English Literature was attempting to compete with both the sciences and the social sciences as an academic discipline. The New Critical methodology, with its emphasis on the close reading of short poems, provided a "convenient pedagogical method of coping with a growing student population," particularly in the period following World War II.¹

Though each of the New Critics pursued a somewhat different set of ideas about poetry, the fundamental nature of their inquiry followed similar lines. In general, the argument of the New Criticism was that the most successful works of literature displayed an "organic unity" which could best be discovered through an understanding of their words, images, figures of speech, and symbols. The New Critics insisted on treating the poem as a self-sufficient verbal object (the "well-wrought urn" or "verbal icon"), and in recognizing, in the words of Ransom, "the autonomy of the work itself as existing for its own sake." They warned against critical practices that distracted the reader from the poem itself, such as the "intentional fallacy" (the idea that a work should be judged according to the intentions of its author) and the "affective fallacy" (the idea that a work should be judged according to its emotional effects on the reader). Finally, they avoided readings that relied on biography, psychology, or historical and social context.

According to the New Critics, the primary focus of the reader should be on a poem's verbal construction, and especially on its use of such elements as "tension," "irony," and "paradox" in achieving an equilibrium of opposed forces. Ransom's more particular version of this argument was that a poem consists of two basic elements – structure (its argument or logical discourse) and texture (its imagery, rhythm, sound, and diction). In order for a poem to be successful, these two elements should exist in a sort of dramatic tension. The primary methodology of the New Criticism was the close reading or "explication" of the poem, which would reveal the complex interrelations of meanings and ambiguities within the text.

The New Criticism was highly successful in training a generation of readers in the methods of close literary analysis. But in creating a new critical orthodoxy it also limited the range of possible responses to poetry, and as a result engendered an academic poetry establishment that was conservative in its literary tastes. The spirit of experimentation that had characterized the modernist era was replaced by an often rigid and unimaginative brand of literary formalism, and during the Cold War the New Criticism provided a convenient means of avoiding an engagement with current social and political issues. Many poets of the 1950s and 1960s conceived of their work as a rebellion against what they saw as the highly conventional poetic practices of the New Critics and their followers.

The formalist mode of poetic writing can be divided into three generational moments. The first of these moments was that associated with the New Criticism of the 1920s and 1930s; the second included the formalists of the generation who emerged in the 1940s and 1950s under the influence of the New Critics as well as Eliot and W. H. Auden. A third wave of formalist poetry, identified as the "New Formalism," began in the 1980s and lasted until the end of the century. This chapter will be concerned primarily with the first of these generations, and to a somewhat lesser extent with the second and third.

John Crowe Ransom

Ransom was born in 1888 in rural Tennessee, the son of a Methodist minister. A precocious student, he entered Vanderbilt at the age of fifteen and graduated in 1909. Ransom studied classics at Oxford from 1910 to 1913, before returning to Vanderbilt as an instructor in the English department. He began writing poetry in about 1916, and in 1919 he published his first volume, *Poems about God*. In the early 1920s, Ransom discovered his mature poetic voice, publishing his two most important books of poetry: *Chills and Fever* (1924) and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1927). From that point on, he

wrote relatively few poems, preferring to focus on his teaching and on the critical essays for which he is most famous.

Ransom should rightly be seen as a minor poet of the 1920s rather than a major poet of the modernist era, but he nonetheless wrote a handful of poems in which he achieves a true mastery of poetic form and expression. His poetry is traditional in both form and subject matter, yet it displays a sensibility more typical of modernism in its biting irony and its refusal of nineteenth-century modes of sentimentality. Stylistically, Ransom's best work is characterized by its skillful prosody, its metaphysical wit, and its satirical contrast of formal literary language with the colloquial idiom. In his most famous poem, "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" (1924), Ransom presents a seemingly sentimental situation – the death of a young girl – only to undermine that sentimentality in the poem itself:

There was such speed in her little body,
And such lightness in her footfall,
It is no wonder her brown study
Astonishes us all.

Her wars were bruited in our high window,
We looked among orchard trees and beyond
Where she took arms against her shadow,
Or harried unto the pond.

The lazy geese, like a snow cloud
Dripping their snow on the green grass,
Tricking and stopping, sleepy and proud,
Who cried in goose, Alas,

For the tireless heart within the little
Lady with rod that made them rise
From their noon apple-dreams and scuttle
Goose-fashion under the skies!

But now go the bells, and we are ready,
In one house we are sternly stopped
To say we are vexed at her brown study.
Lying so primly propped.

As in many of Ransom's poems, we find the theme of mortality, but his treatment of the theme is very unusual. The poem is certainly not a typical elegy, in which the primary purpose is to express grief at the death of a loved one; further, the poem's resolution provides no sense of consolation or compensation for the loss of the young girl. Both the somewhat prose-like rhythms and the oddly stiff diction of the poem create a distance from the events described. In Ransom's own terminology, the *structure* of the poem is that of a traditional elegy, but the *texture* remains in an uneasy

tension with the elegiac form. Even the poem's title distances us from its subject: the girl, whose first name is never given, is referred to only as "John Whiteside's daughter." In the poem itself, the words "astonishes" and "vexed" suggest that rather than an outpouring of grief at the death of the little girl, the narrator experiences surprise and vexation at an event which "has upset our human calculation." Throughout the poem, Ransom plays with the discrepancy between the very simple theme and the unusual diction and phrasing. Ransom adopts a mock heroic language in evoking "wars . . . bruited in our high window" and "arms" taken against shadows. This language, evoking an epic battle rather than a girl's play, is contrasted with the humorous scene of the geese who are herded by the girl and made to "scuttle / Goose-fashion under the skies." The word "bruited," perhaps the most unusual usage in the poem, suggests that the girl's battles with the geese are rumored far and wide, but it also has the less pleasant connotation of a noise or roar which may have disturbed the speaker in his "high window."

The first stanza begins with an evocative portrait of the girl, informing us of her youth, vivacity, and grace (the syntactic parallelism of the "speed in her little body" and the "lightness in her footfall" providing a perfectly balanced portrait). But in the final two lines of the stanza, this imagery is strongly contrasted with the image of the girl's body laid out in her coffin (her "brown study"), a sight which "astonishes us all." The contrast between the almost violently active little girl, who "harried" the geese with her "rod," and the still body now in the coffin, is very effective. This effect is accentuated by the final line of the poem, which presents her as "lying so primly propped." Here there is an unnaturalness or formality about her appearance: her primness in death contrasts with her boldness and recklessness in life; her "propped" posture in the coffin contrasts with her former activity; and the "brown study" of her death contrasts with the natural world of orchard, pond, and geese with which she was associated in life.

The poem avoids falling into pathos in several ways: by its contrasts of tone and language, by its use of epithets that create ironic distance ("the little / Lady with rod"), and by never departing from the perspective of an uninvolved adult neighbor who appreciates the girl's innocence and energy but appears not even to know her name. We can easily see why Randall Jarrell called the poem "perfectly realized . . . and almost perfect." The poem subtly blends humor with pathos, connecting both through a simple yet elegant imagery. The simile of the geese dropping their white feathers "like a snow cloud / Dripping their snow on the green grass" suggests the possibility of natural process into an aesthetic appreciation, but the death of the girl affords no such luxury, only the vexation of being "sternly stopped" by her "brown study." The absurdity of the conceit of the geese themselves

mourning the girl's death ("Alas" they cry in goose language), adds to the general starkness of the poem's tragi-comic vision. The bells of the poem are church bells, but they are also the bells of mortality that toll, as John Donne put it, for us all.

Allen Tate

The second poet to emerge from the New Critical nexus was Allen Tate. Tate's brilliant intellect and precocious poetic talent were a match for Ransom, and as an undergraduate he dazzled his classmates and teachers (including Ransom) with his knowledge of the French symbolists. On the recommendation of Hart Crane – with whom Tate began corresponding in the early 1920s – he also began reading the modernists. Tate and Ransom did not agree about *The Waste Land* (Tate admired the poem while Ransom attacked it) and their attitudes toward poetic modernism in general would remain markedly different throughout their careers.

Tate left Vanderbilt in 1924 and moved to New York City, where he lived until 1928. While in New York, Tate published his first collection of poems (*Mr. Pope and Other Poems*), as well as a biography of the Confederate general Stonewall Jackson. Tate's most famous poem, "Ode to the Confederate Dead," was composed in 1926 and revised in 1930. The irregular form of the "Ode" is not typical of Tate's poetry of the 1920s, which more often conformed to the formal style associated with the New Criticism. Nevertheless, the "Ode" remains Tate's most important composition.

Tate's poem represented his own "quest of the past," as he put it in a 1928 letter. It was a quest to recover not only the cultural past of the South, but also the history of his family, which had been "scattered to the four winds" after the Civil War. The poem is formally complex: though lacking a regular verse form, it contains a varied rhyme scheme and makes use of frequent repetition and internal rhyme. The action of the poem takes place at the gate of a Confederate graveyard on a late autumn afternoon. A lone man views the falling leaves, which remind him of the "seasonal eternity of death" as they pile up on the gravestones. In the second stanza, the man pauses for what Tate calls "a baroque meditation on the ravages of time":

Autumn is desolation in the plot
Of a thousand acres where these memories grow
From the inexhaustible bodies that are not
Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row.
Think of the autumns that have come and gone!
Ambitious November with the humors of the year,

With a particular zeal for every slab,
Staining the uncomfortable angels that rot
On the slabs, a wing chipped here, an arm there:
The brute curiosity of an angel's stare
Turns you, like them, to stone,
Transforms the heaving air
Till plunged to a heavier world below
You shift your sea-space blindly
Heaving, turning like the blind crab.

The man experiences autumn's changes as a "desolation"; he is deeply troubled by the "brute curiosity" of the angel's stare, perhaps because he can no longer participate in the "active faith" enjoyed by his ancestors. He goes through a series of metamorphoses that reflect the torpor of his psyche: he is turned into stone, descends into "sea-space," and is finally transformed into a "blind crab."

While Tate's theme of death and the inexorable passage of time is universal, the narrative situation is specific to the South. The protagonist, a Southern intellectual who is clearly a version of Tate himself, is reminded by the Confederate military cemetery of how profoundly the South has changed. As Louis Rubin suggests, the "New South of cities and factories" has begun to replace the South beloved of the Fugitives and later the Agrarians. "Surveying the heroic past and the empty present," Rubin notes, "the young Southerner could only feel himself in isolation from what were now his region's ways."² Later in the poem, the speaker finds that he is unable to address even the bones of the Confederate dead: "What shall we say to the bones, unclean, / Whose verdurous anonymity will grow? . . . We shall say only the leaves whispering / In the improbable mist of nightfall." The heroic world of Confederate soldiers is lost to the modern Southerner, who cannot experience nature in anything other than predatory or alienated terms: the grass nurtured by the soldiers' bodies has turned an "insane green"; the graveyard is a place where "gray lean spiders come, they come and go"; and the willow trees growing above the graves form a "tangle" that blocks out all light. In this haunted place, only the "singular screech-owl's tight / Invisible lyric" can be heard.

Tate plays effectively with sound throughout the poem, especially in his use of end rhymes. In the stanza quoted above, the first four lines have a traditional rhyme scheme (abab), but in the rest of the stanza the rhymes are looser in organization. After rhyming "year" with "there," Tate disrupts the rhyme scheme by adding the unexpected rhymes of "stare" and "air." In other cases, rhyming words are so far removed from each other that we almost forget they are rhymes at all: "below" comes eight lines after "row," and "crab" follows a similar distance after "slab." The effect of these delayed

and irregularly repeated rhymes is to create a feeling of anxiety, mirroring the attitude of the narrator as he contemplates the eerie graveyard.

The rhythms are similarly irregular, ranging from three to six beats per line and working strongly against the fluidity of regular iambic meter. As Tate himself suggested in his essay on the poem, the rhythm of the poem was intended to match its theme. Just as the dramatic tension of the poem resides in the contrast between two ideas – the “heroic theme” of “active faith” represented by the Confederate dead, and the “fragmentary cosmos” which results from the solipsism of the modern world – the poem’s rhythm was meant to be a modulation between a formal regularity and a “broken rhythm” which would capture the failure of heroic emotion. Thus we find the alternation between lines of heroic pentameter (“Autumn is desolation in the plot,” “Think of the autumns that have come and gone!”) – which evoke a romanticized sense of the past – and the shorter lines toward the end of the stanza that comment on the modern speaker’s situation. After the image of the broken statue, “a wing chipped here, an arm there,” the lines become shorter and less elegiac, suggesting the fragmentary and impotent nature of the viewer’s experience. The double caesura of “Turns you, like them, to stone” creates a heavy, stonelike feeling, while the opening trochees of the final line, “Heaving, turning like the blind crab,” accentuate the image of the awkwardly moving crab itself.

This second stanza alone gives an indication of the complexity of Tate’s poem. Yet at the same time it also displays the limitations of Tate’s style. Tate’s “Ode” does not rise to the level of dense formal achievement found in Crane’s best work or in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, nor does it achieve the ironic compression of Ransom’s strongest poems. And while the poem contains moments of lyric brilliance and effective imagery, it lacks the formal and thematic possibilities represented by modernist poems such as Pound’s *Cantos*, Eliot’s *Waste Land*, and Williams’ *Paterson*.

The New Criticism and postwar poetry

Although the New Criticism was an American phenomenon, it was part of a more general trend toward poetic formalism on both sides of the Atlantic. During the mid-1930s, volumes by William Empson, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and W. H. Auden helped establish a period style in the work of younger English poets. The most influential of these poets was Auden, whose work was formal, casually ironic, and technically accomplished. Auden’s poetry exerted an influence on an emerging generation of American poets, including John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, Karl Shapiro, Richard Wilbur, Richard Howard, and James Merrill. In 1939,

Auden emigrated to the United States; he became a United States citizen in 1946. Auden’s presence in American literary life – as a teacher and lecturer in various colleges and universities, as an actively publishing poet, and as the editor of the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets – made the 1940s and early 1950s the “Age of Auden.” John Ashbery, who wrote his senior thesis on Auden in 1949, claimed that when he began reading modern poetry, Auden was “the modern poet,” just as Eliot had been the quintessential modern poet for the previous generation. Auden never became fully Americanized, however, and despite the importance of his influence on a generation of poets, anthologists and literary historians have generally not included him among the ranks of American poets.

In the years following World War II, many younger poets adopted the formal style popularized by Auden and the New Critics. Much of the poetry written during the late 1940s and 1950s – a period identified as the “Age of Conformity” (Irving Howe) and the “tranquillized Fifties” (Robert Lowell) – paid more attention to matters of technique and formal method than to novelty of idea or conception. Many poets preferred to remain within the relative safety of fixed forms like the sonnet or rhymed quatrain; the social and political conservatism of the period was reflected in the poems themselves, which often avoided taking stylistic, thematic, or formal risks. The typical poetry of the period can be found in a number of anthologies that served to solidify the shared vision of an academic or mainstream style. Such collections as John Ciardi’s *Mid-Century American Poets* (1950), Rolfe Humphries’s *New Poems by American Poets* (1953), W. H. Auden’s *Criterion Book of Modern American Verse* (1956), and Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson’s *New Poets of England and America* (1957) introduced a new generation of formal poets, including Wilbur, Merrill, Howard Nemerov, Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Donald Justice, and William Meredith.

This generation of postwar formalists were all born between 1920 and 1930, and they were well educated, well traveled, and cosmopolitan. Merrill, for example, was the son of a prominent financier, the principal founder of one of America’s largest brokerage houses. As a group, these poets represent the core of the academic poetry establishment over the last several decades of the twentieth century, and they have been highly feted by that establishment. Merrill received the National Book Award, the Bollingen Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize. Justice and Nemerov both won the Pulitzer, and both Nemerov and Meredith served as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress. Wilbur was appointed the nation’s Poet Laureate, succeeding Robert Penn Warren.

The typical poems produced by academic poets of the 1950s and 1960s reflect strongly the influence of the New Critics and of the more formal

poets of the modernist generation, such as Frost, Yeats, and Stevens. They are formal, witty, and impersonal, seeking an elegance of phrasing and often a relaxed or insouciant tone. A good example of such polished writing is Richard Wilbur's poem "A Simile for Her Smile":

Your smiling, or the hope, the thought of it,
Makes in my mind such pause and abrupt ease
As when the highway bridgegates fall,
Balking the hasty traffic, which must sit
On each side massed and staring, while
Deliberately the drawbridge starts to rise:

Then horns are hushed, the oilsmoke rarefies,
Above the idling motors one can tell
The packet's smooth approach, the slip,
Slip of the silken river past the sides,
The ringing of clear bells, the dip
And slow cascading of the paddle wheel.

Wilbur displays a good deal of technique here, but he does so in a seemingly effortless manner. There is none of the tension between form and theme we find in Ransom's poetry, and the poem is easily appreciated both for its charming use of the extended simile and for its manipulation of form and sound. The end rhymes bring a sense of unity to the stanzas, which achieve an ideal balance between strict iambic pentameter and frequent but never jarring variation from it. Wilbur makes effective use of alliteration, especially in the second stanza, and he makes us feel the motion of the water in the "slip, / Slip of the silken river past the sides." The simile itself is inventive yet does not strain the powers of the imagination: the smile of the young woman to whom the poem is addressed is compared (somewhat unexpectedly) to the rising of a drawbridge which slowly allows the passage of a paddle-wheel boat. Finally, Wilbur indulges in both wordplay (in the title's play of similarity between "simile" and "smile"), and paradox ("abrupt ease").

Despite all the ways in which the poem is successful, however, we cannot consider it an *important* poem. It manages a nice conceit, but it also avoids any engagement with larger ideas or issues. No specificity is given about the relationship between the speaker and the woman he hopes will smile at him; no real emotion is expressed or portrayed, despite the attempt to capture the sense of a potentially emotional moment; and no larger social or philosophical statement is made. The use of the urban imagery of cars, highways, bridges, and oilsmoke is made to serve no purpose other than as an analogy for a moment of personal happiness; as a result, such imagery comes to seem almost gratuitous.

In the 1960s, poets such as James Merrill began adopting formalist, post-New Critical techniques in more obviously autobiographical poems. Merrill's "The Broken Home" (1967), an autobiographical account of his parents and their divorce, is written in the form of seven consecutive sonnets. While "The Broken Home" relates details about Merrill's life, it is not a "confessional" poem in the way that we will see in the work of Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath. Instead, it remains distanced from the rawness of personal experience both by its formal structure and by its somewhat detached, ironic tone. Merrill's "wit" can be compared to Ransom's: like Ransom, Merrill uses packed phrasing to evoke a complexity of feeling and awareness, and he makes frequent use of puns and wordplay, especially in his manipulation of familiar clichés. We see Merrill's technique at work in the second sonnet:

My father, who had flown in World War I,
Might have continued to invest his life
In cloud banks well above Wall Street and wife,
But the race was run below, and the point was to win.

Too late now, I make out in his blue gaze
(Through the smoked glass of being thirty-six)
The soul eclipsed by twin black pupils, sex
And business; time was money in those days.

Each thirteenth year he married. When he died
There were already several chilled wives
In sable orbit – rings, cars, permanent waves,
We'd felt him warming up for the green bride.

He could afford it. He was "in his prime"
At three score ten. But money was not time.

If, as Don Adams suggests, the speaker's central quest is "to rediscover who his parents really were and are," this sonnet begins that task by examining the life of his father.³ The sonnet turns on the cliché "time is money," an expression associated both with the father and with the era in which he made his fortune. By the final couplet, the cliché is turned around as the father's death ironically suggests that "money was not time": despite all the money he has made and the fact that he still claims to be "in his prime" at the age of seventy, he cannot buy back the years he wasted in the pursuit of money and a succession of ever younger wives. The other crucial phrase in the sonnet is "too late now," suggesting that the son has failed until now to recognize his father's failures. In these lines, however, he makes up for lost time by offering a crushing denunciation of his father's life and values.

The form of the poem contributes to Merrill's theme of an emotional and spiritual emptiness in his father's life: each quatrain contains one full rhyme

and one rhyme in which the vowel has been changed (one/win, sex/six, wives/waves). The use of these slant rhymes suggests that the apparent solidity of the father's life fails to disguise a hollowness or lack of integrity at its center.

The most obvious stylistic tendency of the poem is Merrill's use of puns. The pun on "cloud banks" turns the father's apparently solid profession of brokering and investment banking into an insubstantial and transitory object. Merrill also puns on "sable" (denoting both the dark color of the outer space where the satellite wives orbit and the fur coats he has given them) and "rings" (the orbits of the wives around the father as well as their wedding bands). The "chilled wives" evoke "chilled" cocktails, suggesting the father's superficial and decadent life.

Merrill's language is packed not only with such wordplay, but also with metaphors, clusters of imagery, and mythic structures. The father, for example, is introduced as having "flown in World War I," and the discourse of flight and air is continued in "cloud banks," "eclipsed," and "orbit." Through the sequencing of these metaphors, the apparently heroic fact of the father's having been a pilot in the war is ironized: now he is no longer the war hero, but a stationary figure around whom the various ex-wives orbit.

Like Ransom, Merrill creates further ironies by playing with the tension between a highly compressed poetic idiom ("The soul eclipsed by twin black pupils") and a more relaxed, colloquial diction and phrasing ("the point was to win," "he could afford it"). Like Ransom, too, Merrill places heavy demands on the reader's intelligence and sensitivity to language. Such poetry appeals to the pleasures of the intellect; at times, however, its ironic cleverness can come to seem strained and almost arch. Merrill's preoccupation with style at times prevents the poem from making a direct emotional connection with the reader.

The poems that made the greatest impact on the development of American poetry during the 1950s and 1960s were not those written in the formal style of Merrill and Wilbur. By the late 1950s, American poetry was already undergoing what James Breslin has referred to as a "radical transformation of poetic theory and practice."⁴ The poetry of New Critical formalism, a style that had "rigified into orthodoxy" and begun to feel "limited, excluding [and] impoverished," was rejected by many poets who participated in a sweeping "antiformalist revolt."⁵ The dramatic change in postwar American poetry was the result of a feeling of deep dissatisfaction with inherited models of language and form. Robert Lowell, for example, remarked that while poets had become extremely proficient at writing in set forms, such writing no longer seemed relevant to the conditions of contemporary life:

[T]he writing seems divorced from culture somehow. It's become too much something specialized that can't handle much experience. It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life.⁶

Robert Creeley put this same critique of formalist poetry in even stronger terms:

Poems were equivalent to cars insofar as many could occur of a similar pattern – although each was, of course, "singular." But it was this assumption of a mold, of a means that could be gained beyond the literal fact of the writing *here and now*, that had authority. It is the more ironic to think of it, remembering the incredible pressure of *feeling* in those years, of all that did want "to be said," of so much confusion and pain wanting statement in its own terms.⁷

What Lowell and Creeley both experienced was the sense of a cultural crisis, a moment when poetry needed once again to become "disruptive – critical of its culture, of its immediate past, of itself."⁸ The desire to enact some "breakthrough back into life," as Lowell put it, to critique its own conventions as well as aspects of American culture and society as a whole, was the central motivating force of American poetry in the decades after World War II.

In terms of its impact on American poetry as a whole, Lowell's 1959 volume *Life Studies* represented such a breakthrough. Not only did *Life Studies* contain a number of striking and memorable poems – including "Skunk Hour," "Waking in the Blue," "Memories of West Street and Lepke," "Man and Wife," "During Fever," and "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" – but it marked a dramatic departure from a style of poetry that had already earned Lowell significant literary success. Lowell's 1946 volume *Lord Weary's Castle* had won him the Pulitzer Prize, a Guggenheim fellowship, an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the prestigious post of Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress. The most powerful poems in *Lord Weary's Castle*, such as "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," are written in a densely rhetorical and almost Miltonic style. In this wartime elegy for his cousin Warren Winslow, who died at sea when his navy ship sank, Lowell writes in what can be described as a high literary mode:

Whenever winds are moving and their breath
Heaves at the roped-in bulwarks of this pier,
The terns and sea-gulls tremble at your death
In these home waters. Sailor, can you hear
The Pequod's sea wings, beating landward, fall
Headlong and break on our Atlantic wall

Off 'Sconset, where the yawing S-boats splash
 The bellbuoy, with ballooning spinnakers,
 As the entangled, screeching mainsheet clears
 the blocks: off Madaket, where lubbers lash
 The heavy surf and throw their long lead squids
 For blue-fish?

The rhyming pentameter lines – broken by frequent enjambment and caesura – and the highly pressurized energy of the language create an undeniable effect. That effect might be described as dizzying: we need to read the poem several times before we can get past the sounds of the language (propelled by alliteration and the onomatopoeic descriptions of splashing boats and screeching sails) and the syntactic complexity. The poem's literary modes are traditional: personification (the winds's breath), metaphor (the ship's sails as wings), and the pathetic fallacy (the gulls and terns mourn the sailor's death). We might contrast this passage with lines from *Life Studies* such as those at the beginning of "Memories of West Street and Lepke":

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
 in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
 I hog a whole house on Boston's
 "hardly passionate Marlborough Street"

Here, the line-lengths are uneven and there is no longer a discernable impulse toward iambic pentameter. The language is more casual and even colloquial: the speaker is not reading but "book-worming," and he "hogs" a whole house. The initial gesture of the poem is a deflationary one: beginning with the word "only," Lowell then tantalizes the reader with the alliteration of "teaching on Tuesdays" and the somewhat intriguing image of "book-worming" before offering the thoroughly flat second line (its verbal flatness emphasized by the addition of an extra foot). Even the visual appearance of the poem is more relaxed and prose-like: for example, Lowell no longer capitalizes the words on the left-hand margin.

The energy Lowell creates in "The Quaker Graveyard" comes largely from his use of active verbs: "heaves," "tremble," "hear," "fall," "break," "splash," "clears," "lash," and "throw." The opening stanza of "Memories of West Street and Lepke," in contrast, has only two active verbs in eleven lines, and both of these actions can be read ironically: the poet "hogs" a whole house on Marlborough Street, and his daughter "rises" ("like the sun") in her "flame-flamingo infants' wear." The two most energetic verbs in the stanza – "book-worming" and "scavenging" – are presented in a more passive tense (the present progressive), a tendency that continues throughout the rest of the poem: "telling off the state and president," "waiting sentence," "strolling," "wearing chocolate double-breasted suits," "piling towels on a

rack," "dawdling off," "hanging like an oasis." In a poem that is at least in part about Lowell's "lost connections" with his past, the mood of dissipation created by the passive verb tenses conveys his own sense of uselessness and ineffectuality. The poetry of "A Quaker Graveyard" may be more inspired, more obviously "poetic," but it is the poetry of "Memories of West Street and Lepke" that comes closer to capturing the feeling of "real life" in the postwar era as Lowell and others perceived it.

The New Formalism

The revival of metered and rhymed poetry in the 1980s among a group of younger poets constituted the third generational wave of formal verse in the twentieth century. Adopting the somewhat pretentious title the "New Formalism," poets disaffected by the unstructured free verse of the "workshop" lyric (the dominant style in university creative-writing programs during the 1970s and 1980s) sought to reinvigorate the practice of American poetry in traditional forms and meters. Depending on where one stood within the verse culture of the period, these New Formalists (or neo-formalists) were either reactionaries attempting to turn back the clock to the days of the New Critics, poetic revolutionaries seeking to counter the tide of vapid free verse, or a small and ultimately negligible thorn in the side of mainstream poetry.

The New Formalists, though relatively few in number compared with practitioners of free verse, were a vocal and articulate minority. Members of a generation born in the 1940s and 1950s, many of them were professors, critics, translators, and editors as well as poets, and they were connected with periodicals such as *The Hudson Review*, *The New Criterion*, and *The New England Review*. In 1985, Philip Dacey and David Jauss edited *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, the first significant anthology of formal poetry to be published in the United States since the early 1960s. This was followed by a book of essays on the New Formalism, *Expansive Poetry*, edited by Frederick Feirstein in 1989. Finally, in 1996, the publication of *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism*, solidified the "canon" of New Formalist poets. *Rebel Angels* brought together the best-known New Formalists – Dana Gioia, Brad Leithauser, Molly Peacock, Mary Jo Salter, and Timothy Steele – along with formalists like Marilyn Hacker and Rafael Campo who had not previously been included under the banner of the New Formalism.

The work of the New Formalists ranges from the fairly traditional use of fixed forms to a more innovative use of formal techniques and structures. An example of the latter would be Brad Leithauser's sonnet "Post-Coitum Tristesse," written entirely in monosyllable lines. Another strategy is to

create tension between traditional forms and more challenging content. Molly Peacock's sixteen line "exploded" sonnet "Those Paperweights with Snow Inside" plays a narrative of domestic violence against the apparent solidity of the sonnet form. Hacker's "Cancer Winter" describes in a series of Italian sonnets the poet's battle with breast cancer. R. S. Gwynn's three-sonnet sequence "Body Bags" tells tragic stories in miniature. The sestet of the second poem is particularly brutal in its use of rhyming iambic meter:

I saw him one last time. He'd added weight
Around the neck, used words like "grunt" and "slope,"
And said he'd swap his Harley and his dope
And both balls for a 4-F knee like mine.
This happened in the spring of '68.
He hanged himself in 1969.

Here the form is used with ironic intent. When read aloud, the final line comes out in perfect iambic pentameter; yet the shortness of the line makes it appear to be visually cut off, just as the young man's life was prematurely ended by his suicide.

Unfortunately, not all the poems by the New Formalists are this successful or innovative in their use of form. In fact, many of the poems in *Rebel Angels* seem to substitute the requirement of formal consistency for any originality of poetic voice or vision. As a fairly typical example, I quote two stanzas from Elizabeth Alexander's "Who I Think You Are":

Baba's home is different from my daddy's:
the sofa arms are draped with quiet lace,
Does he fix fish with cardamon and mace?
Coupons in a cookie tin. Meat patties,

Steaming Cream of Wheat and ripe banana,
juice cups with the little paper hats
the guava jelly jars on plastic mats.
We are your children and receive your manna.

Technically, these lines are competent: they rhyme in a neat *abba* pattern, they sustain a regular though not overly insistent iambic pentameter, and they use caesura to vary the rhythmic effect within the stanzas. But one might well ask what the New Critics would have made of such poetry. There is little of the complexity – on the level of diction, imagery, figurative language, wordplay, argument, or voice – that formal verse at its best makes possible. Even in terms of what Ransom would call the poem's "texture," there is nothing striking in terms of the manipulation of form. The closest the stanzas come to any kind of ironic tension is in the witty rhyme of "banana" with "manna," but even here it is not clear whether any irony is intended.

The New Formalism can be usefully contrasted with the other most visible poetic movement of the 1980s: the Language Poetry. Both the New Formalists and the Language Poets rejected mainstream free-verse lyric as it was practiced in writing workshops across the country. But while the Language Poets were participants in a poetic avant garde that sought to revitalize the linguistic and formal procedures of American poetry (see chapter 10), the New Formalists seemed curiously retrogressive in their attempt to resurrect the practices of a half century or more ago. The argument of the New Formalists for a greater attention to poetic form, and more specifically to traditional metrical forms, no longer seems as convincing as did the argument made by the New Critics of the 1930s and 1940s for a more rigorous attention to form. The critical methods developed by the New Critics were an important advance on the dominant critical practice of the time, and their poetry can be seen primarily as a logical extension of their critical practice rather than vice versa. In the case of the New Formalism, on the other hand – which seems to have evolved as an aesthetically conservative reflex against what was perceived as the "laxity" of the 1960s and 1970s – the poetry has developed no new critical or theoretical apparatus to support it. The claims by the movement's advocates that it represents a "revolution" in the practice of American poetry seem at best hyperbolic and at worst demagogic. First of all, there is nothing revolutionary about writing in sonnets and quatrains. And secondly, there has been no "fundamental change" in the writing of American poetry, since the vast majority of published poetry continues to be in free verse.

All this is not to question whether traditional forms have a place in American poetry (clearly they do), but rather to ask whether consecrating a "movement" to the writing of formal verse – far from being an act of revolutionary potential – is merely to perpetuate the notion that "real" poetry must include such elements as rhyme, regular meter, and stanzaic form. Over the course of the century, the strongest American poets have shown that poetic language emerges out of the poet's confrontation with the texture and meanings of individual words rather than as a result of the insertion of these words into prefabricated forms. If, as Robert Creeley put it, "form is never more than an extension of content," then the decisions poets make about what forms to write in are ultimately of less importance than the things they have to say.