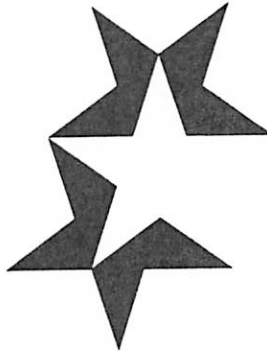


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Tests of Poetry

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These differences have been marked out before, of course—often interestingly. In the late 1940s, for instance, E. M. W. Tillyard issued two literary histories of poetry, the revised *Poetry Direct and Oblique* (1945) and *Five Poems* (1948). In the first he contended that the poetry of statement is necessary for the understanding of more intense poetry. In the second he presented close historical readings of five poems covering 500 years before 1900—none from the twentieth century—choosing a poem each to represent its century. He contended that the representativeness of a poem was determined by the fidelity with which it expressed the ideas of its age. Vivienne Koch, a poet affiliated with modernism as well as with leftist historicism, deemed Tillyard's intellectual history of poetics largely a failure. Tillyard claimed that he did not wish to consider topical commonplaces in isolation, emphasizing "the inter-play between thought and form that constitutes the main pleasure of reading" (Koch 706). Yet Koch saw that in his actual analyses of the poems Tillyard ignored form. She noted, just as Robert von Hallberg does in the present divergence, that "not all good poetry embodies 'great commonplaces' or even 'topical' ones" and that poetry must qualify "as poetry" before such detailed literary-historical consideration is warranted (706). She announced her preference for a very different and very ambitious literary history of poetry published in 1948 by the tiny Objectivist Press of Brooklyn—Louis Zukofsky's *A Test of Poetry*. This was a controversial judgment, given Tillyard's supereminence, the powerful sway at the time of the "world picture" approach to poetry, and Zukofsky's reputation as an incomprehensible communist modernist. Yet Zukofsky was better than Tillyard because his literary history of poetry "enunciate[d] some principles of judgment" and because he worked with the history of poetry in order to understand poetry as a living art (708).

As Tillyard, Zukofsky, and Koch discovered, it is difficult to account for the importance of poetic form in the large literary history; and modernism—the aesthetic of our era or of the era from which we have recently passed—increases the difficulty. Poetry and history are especially hard in so historiographically self-

conscious a series as the *Cambridge History of American Literature*. When Sacvan Bercovitch as general editor summarized his experience convening literary histories of American verse, he noted that poetry was an especially "problematic" category. He was introducing several of his editors; his prefatory remark seems to anticipate their accounts as reports on the difficulties they faced when "conveying formalist lines of continuity and change within a context appropriate to broad historical developments." Yet his editor of late-nineteenth-century poetry, Shira Wolosky, seems to have had no such problem. Her account of writing "Poetry and Public Discourse," the *CHAL* section on American poetry from 1855 to 1900, is an untroubled restatement of the reasonable but familiar thesis that "[i]n the nineteenth century, poetry had a vibrant and active role within ongoing discussions defining America and its cultural directions." Poetry circulated among the social discourses. Wolosky's way of defining history's relation to the poetic is an iterative, circular version of historical determinism—very "Taine-ish," to use Barbara Packer's term here for the historicist extreme she wants momentarily to appreciate in her rejoinder to Robert von Hallberg, who, Packer believes, stands at the other extreme. "Literature," writes Wolosky, "as an art and a discipline itself thus *participates* in, and *reflects*, history as it has been *shaped by* rhetoric, and rhetoric as it has been *shaped by* history." "Poetry," she says, "represents and reflects such cultural norms as . . ."—and then she goes on to name the themes she found "reflect[ed]" in the poetry.

Few who write about modern American poetry—and still fewer contemporary poets—would speak of poetry's *themes* in such a way. A line is drawn between the poetries of the two centuries, as Vivienne Koch had drawn one between Tillyard's pre-modern poetics and Zukofsky's radical contemporary sensibility. The fact is that Wolosky's fine study of American poetry before modernism for *CHAL* indeed "confirms the mutual reference" between verse on one hand and modes of writing on the other that evince lesser concern for formal matters (newspapers, tracts, guide books, ecclesiastical texts, and urban sociology).

So while Bercovitch prepared us nicely for trouble, it was really only the critic concerned with modern poetry—von Hallberg—who reported having had difficulty "dealing with traditions of poetry in what was basically a historical-cultural undertaking," as again Bercovitch framed the dilemma. Packer persuasively explains why modernists have the convenience of experiencing such trouble. (For one thing, there is simply so much modern and contemporary poetry from which to choose; the literary historian of modern poetry has a freedom others lack. Both

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categories of and rationales for inclusion are ample.) She then reaffirms her own true fascination with nineteenth-century US poetry, which, because it aesthetically so often "spluttered and struggled" (giving us a precious few "resonant lines" in "poems otherwise murky or garrulous"), naturally sends the literary historian into the history that surrounds, supports, and undermines such lines.

There is some latent antimodernism here. It is not meant so much as a provocation as a way to mark off some distance between the periods, which is manifested in fundamental formal differences in the poetry—differences that seem to explain if not to necessitate (Packer argues) distinct critical and theoretical approaches. Antimodernism then? Surely. Packer reiterates the old charge that "American poetry did not spring forth, full-grown, from the head of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound." The literary history of modernism is one thing, literary history another. Wolosky reminds us that the ideas of "poetry as a self-enclosed aesthetic realm" and "as a formal object to be approached through more or less exclusively specific categories of formal analysis" are "notions [that] seem only to begin to emerge at the end of the twentieth century." The formal analysis of poetry, an invention of the century in which the poetry it analyzes was written, is founded on the assumption that such work should then be performed on all poetry, the removal of poetic from the relationship ("mutual reference") between poetry and history having already been accomplished.

Theorists of the twentieth-century avant garde have had to formulate responses to this complaint, although not always successfully. A relevant failure is in Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1962). Poggioli was going along just fine until he got to the topic of avant-garde criticism. Why did modernism's detractors attack modern poetry's obscurity? The act of interpreting experimental art, he speculated, was "not a problem of exegesis but of psychology" (154). Understanding "difficult" modern poetry was a matter, in part, of attaining certain familiarity. Arthur Rimbaud's poetry, which aroused such antagonism among the realism-loving, anti-experimentalist public of the time, can be fairly easily comprehended. Indeed, Poggioli argued, Rimbaud's verse presents the reader with fewer difficulties than does the poetry of Pindar, Petrarch, John Donne, or Maurice Scève. Perhaps, he suggests, this fact would help address the problem of history as a means of interpreting poetry *qua* poetry, poem by poem, line by line. Poggioli then launches into a long sentence, logically dependent on a precarious "But whereas," beginning with the idea of "historical reconstruction" available to interpreters of Pindar, Petrarch, Donne, and Scève—to this list Wolosky's work has

added Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and even Stephen Crane; Tillyard had added Charles Swinburne—and concluding with a description of how readers of *contemporary* verse might use history to make sense of the work. Poggioli's sane argument rarely falls apart so completely as here, at the end, when it is his job to persuade us that modern writing can be regarded historically. In contrast to "historical reconstruction of the conditions in which the works were created" for premodern writing, the best he can do for modern writing is this: "a mental *construction*, based on the intuitive awareness of the historicity of artistic experience in our day." Here is the passage:

But whereas the problems offered in interpreting these old masters [Pindar, Petrarch, Donne, Scève] can be solved by the necessary philological preparation, making possible a historical *reconstruction* of the conditions in which the works were created, the generic and specific problem continually offered by contemporary art cannot be resolved except through a mental *construction*, based on the intuitive awareness of the historicity of artistic experience in our day. This postulates the capacity not so much to judge as to feel the process of history which is passing from potentiality into act—considering it not as a monument or document, but as drama and action, as work in process. (154–55)

A crude ratio suggested by these distinctions runs as follows:

interpreting premodern poetry	interpreting "obscure" contemporary poetry
historical reconstruction	mental construction based on the intuitive awareness of the historicity of artistic experience
judge history	feel history
acts	potentiality
document, monument	drama, action, work in progress

If Poggioli, a great friend of modernism, could fall so flat at such a crucial moment, it is no wonder that von Hallberg's idea that "the authority of the *history* [of modern poetry] would rest on the *quality* of the poems I cited" struck at least some people as a repudiation of poetry's progressive connections. Andrew DuBois

has keenly observed in his report on his essay "The voice of suspicion in an era." The result is a political position.

"Poems that are judged, '... do not know themselves,' self knows that the *thetic* revaluation somehow made by von Hallberg achieved as art ten. Whether or not 'etry' would be but indeed the enabled by his historical and aesthetic preemptive. H. tuals" (1996), for instance, 1 "avoided large W. H. Auden's action in *symp* Cold War period Anthony Hecht ally the "allusion ward ... a so books alluded century "rear not permit su connectedness formal aspect treatment of j berg's own *Cl* was not myself was accused a ignoring such such "repression loaded terms ical poems). In torically spec tenor of the n cism as justify claims. "[E]va writes, "since

has keenly observed that the negative response to von Hallberg's report on his experience writing the 1945–1995 history “was to voice suspicion of any evaluative account of the cultural forms of an era.” The response to this provocation, DuBois noted, became a political position.

“Poems that are not fully achieved as art,” von Hallberg argued, “. . . do not affect the history of poetry.” Von Hallberg himself knows that if historical criticism rediscovers or causes *aesthetic* revaluation of some poems that have been suppressed or somehow made unavailable by the forces of history, and if these by von Hallberg's own criteria are deemed to be poems “fully achieved as art,” then the history of poetry will have to be rewritten. Whether or not such poems had “affect[ed] the history of poetry” would be beside the point. Given not just the possibility but indeed the inevitability of such rediscovery and revaluation, enabled by historicist scholars, von Hallberg's definitions of historical and aesthetic criticisms in his statement are categorically preemptive. His own *CHAL* essay, “Poetry, Politics, and Intellectuals” (1996), mixed the categories effectively. There he noted, for instance, that the fashion for metrical poems in the 1950s “avoided large intellectual currents” in part as a reaction against W. H. Auden's experience with communism in the 1930s—or a reaction in *sympathy* with Auden's negative retrospect. Also of the Cold War period von Hallberg observed that while James Merrill, Anthony Hecht, and others seem to eschew social reference, actually the “allusiveness of this poetry does in fact gesture warmly toward . . . a social institution, the modern university, where the books alluded to are taught to students” (64). He takes the mid-century “rear guard” (and its academicism) seriously; but he does not permit such poets to be exempt from a social and political connectedness, the rejection of which they invited through the formal aspects of their poetry. Notwithstanding the sensitive treatment of poets' response to midcentury politics in von Hallberg's own *CHAL* contribution, I take it from reading DuBois (I was not myself present) that after giving his paper von Hallberg was accused at least indirectly of rolling back literary progress, of ignoring such historical acts of “recovery,” or even of tolerating such “repression” (to borrow Cary Nelson's apt but politically loaded terms for the work of undoing formalism's erasure of radical poems). In this context “universality” seems anathema to historically specific progress. DuBois strongly hints at the political tenor of the negative response when he speaks of ahistorical criticism as justifying itself, methodologically, in the universality of its claims. “[E]valuation is suspicious on political grounds,” DuBois writes, “since universality is actually ideological imperialism,

and our profession is not in the habit of encouraging imperialism or harboring those who advance its claims." This was a subtle admission. The dialogue implied in the assemblage of these essays for *ALH* is carried on between the left of confident historicist criticism of nineteenth-century poetry and what that historicism's advocates take to be the retrograde hegemony of the critic of twentieth-century poetry who has the "luxury" (Packer's term) of rising to the "Olympian view" (von Hallberg's) from which he as an "evaluative critic" lays his eyes on good poems and averts his gaze from "[p]oems that are not fully achieved as art." But these latter poems, say the detractors, will be liberated from constraints brought to bear on them by evaluation. In allegedly abandoning history (for modernist history, it is implied), the modernist critic forfeits the sense of continuity offered by critics of the nineteenth century who have worked so hard to "reconstruct" antibourgeois impulses in the formally conventional poetry they study. But some critics of modern poetry prefer to have none of it. Therein lies the problem.

If we would all just get along, modernism and radicalism could seem to have shared the same original antibourgeois sentiments stirring in the 50 years prior to 1900. What roots do modernism and radicalism share? Are their challenges to convention contiguous or merely analogous? Poggioli's error was in concluding they are merely analogous (95). The extent to which the relation between radicalism and modernism is inherent or a case-by-case contingency became in fact a main issue that had to be faced by theorists of the avant-garde who did their work during the height of the Cold War. In *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which was begun in the late 1950s and published (in Italian) in 1962, the suppression of modernism in the Soviet Union casts a shadow so dark and long that the book could barely state, even as a hypothesis then adamantly refuted, "the tendency to equate aesthetic radicalism with political radicalism," an assertion no sooner made than dubbed "a tendency *already* questioned on theoretical grounds in this essay" (168). Poggioli's otherwise coherent study of avant-gardism faltered in the way it handled modernism's a posteriori close fit with political radicalism (a job for the historicist sleuth, whose method he contends is irrelevant to understanding modern poetry). Although his examples of antimodernism are all drawn from the experience of experimental artists facing their antagonists in the West, Poggioli reminded readers that "the avant-garde, like any culture, can only flower in a climate where political liberty triumphs" (95). He could not seem to make straightforwardly the key point about aesthetic form that Peter Bürger made in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, when a decade later the younger theorist was

(as he has admitted) in May 1968 (Bürger) become practically the contents of Bürger's attraction for him to be tolerant of various contentious plastic arts and adequate dogmas of modernism to the ideal of modernist f

Such openness to modernism is of contiguity relationship with themselves. Peter Fearing had known to pre-Depression connection to (re) Carlos Williams "luxury"; the cause they lost in the 1960s, when Fearing and Fearing were buried by and been made up study of reception stating the case for him just as sp Hallberg's den refusal to per ferences) with while almost having one of every graduate not be that w

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(as he has admitted) in the grip of an opposite politics, the aura of May 1968 (Bürger 95): "When avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not [invariably] mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant" (49). Bürger's attraction to radicalism was precisely what permitted him to be tolerant of the ahistorical aesthetic. Susan Sontag's various contentions in the early and mid-1960s that "music and the plastic arts and poetry painfully dug themselves out of the inadequate dogmas of 19th century 'realism,' by a passionate commitment to the idea of progress" showed her to be similarly unafraid of modernist formalism as a version of radicalism (102).

Such openness about radicalism's circulation in and out of modernism is an object lesson for us. In the 1930s, a crucial period of contiguity between various radicalisms and modernisms, the relationship was certainly not news to modernist communists themselves. Poets Stanley Burnshaw, Sol Funaroff, and Kenneth Fearing had known all along that, insofar as they chose to relate to pre-Depression modernism, poetic form would be their connection to (respectively) Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams. Their radical devotion to history gave them this "luxury"; they chose a connection to experimental poetics because they loved fresh, exciting poetry. By the 1950s and early 1960s, when Poggioli was writing his theory, Burnshaw, Funaroff, and Fearing were all but forgotten as poets (their reputations buried by anticommunists and New Critics). Such models had been made unavailable by the anticommunism inscribed in his study of recent aesthetic history. Poggioli's nervousness about stating the continuity from modernism to leftism too openly left him just as speechless about the politics of poetic form as are von Hallberg's detractors who tend to equate his idea of universality (a refusal to permit other discourses to swallow poetry's formal differences) with imperialism (an outcome of ahistoricism). Packer, while almost completely disagreeing with von Hallberg, votes for having one of his sentences carved in stone over the entrance to every graduate English department: "Whatever poetry is, it cannot be that which threatens to swallow it up."

A sense of the poetic should not suffer because intraliberal debates about modernism's historical inheritance from challenges to social convention are refigured as Left vs. Right. Poggioli (whose theory of the avant-garde I have roughly called an artifact of the Cold War) offers no help to von Hallberg in the distinction between the critic of earlier poetry who can *judge* history and the critic of the contemporary who must somehow *feel* history. The elimination of judgment from among the means of the contemporary poetry critic is an impoverished legacy. It was a failure of

A sense of the poetic should not suffer because intraliberal debates about modernism's historical inheritance from challenges to social convention are refigured as Left vs. Right.

