

MODERN

POETRY

AFTER

MODERNISM

JAMES LONGENBACH

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M O D E R N
P O E T R Y
A F T E R
M O D E R N I S M



James Longenbach

Oxford University Press

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Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong
Istanbul Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Longenbach, James.

Modern poetry after modernism / by James Longenbach.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-510177-4 (cloth); —ISBN 0-19-510178-2 (pbk.)

1. American poetry—20th century—History and criticism—Theory,
etc. 2. Postmodernism (Literature)—United States. I. Title.

PS325.L66 1997

811'.509113—dc21

96-45288

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

FOR
A. WALTON LITZ

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PREFACE

This book was prompted by my sense that the stories we usually tell about American poetry cannot account for Elizabeth Bishop's career; it grew from my realization that those stories (usually turning on some sense of formal "breakthrough") cannot make good sense of most of Bishop's contemporaries. Like every poet of her generation, Bishop was keenly aware of what was at stake in writing after modernism; but she did not reduce the modern poets' various and contradictory qualities into an easily opposed program. Her career consequently exhibits no "breakthrough" but extends aspects of modernism that other writers suppressed or neglected to see. The poets I've associated with Bishop share her open relationship to their immediate past. They also share her attitude toward poetic form: whether it's called formal or free, open or closed, form is for these poets what constitutes their utterance, not something that needs to be (or could be) broken through.

Whatever their similarities, these poets are also highly idiosyncratic. Each chapter of this book (except for the first) is shaped in response to the distinctive problems of a particular poet's career. And while the chapters are linked by common concerns, anyone wanting to read only about Wilbur or Ashbery will find my treatments of them pretty much

self-contained. Anyone wanting a tidy narrative about American poetry after modernism might be disappointed. My goal is not so much to offer a story to replace the “breakthrough” narrative as to explore the different ways in which poets have harnessed their modernist past; I’d like to make it harder to rely on seductively oppositional accounts of twentieth-century literary history. While every generation of writers inevitably seeks to distinguish itself from an earlier one, it seems to me that some versions of our past are more useful—more responsive, more generous—than others.

Inasmuch as this book is about postmodernism in American poetry, it takes the word *postmodern* as literally as possible. When the word is applied to poetry at all, it usually describes a particular school of poetry after modernism; a poet’s place in that school is signaled by the use of certain ideologically charged formal strategies. I use the word *postmodern* to describe any poet who writes with a self-conscious sense of coming after modernism; from my perspective, poetic form has no inevitable relationship to any ideological position. Consequently, the cast of characters most often associated with postmodernism is not prominent here. A variety of postmodernisms must be discriminated, since the terms of one will not always account for the development of another: my terms are conceived in response to the circumscribed yet abundant world of American poetry.

I’ve tried to translate the parameters of my own taste into the widest possible account of that world, one that may honor poets as different as Wilbur and Ashbery. If I haven’t strayed from the more-or-less dominant figures of the last fifty years, I’ve tried to suggest that the mainstream of postmodern poetry is, like that of modern poetry, more strange and equivocal than we might imagine. The poets I’ve selected seem to me representative in that, however distinctive, they have not been invested heavily in distinctions. Resisting the need to balance enthusiasms with antagonisms, they have welcomed the diversity of their contemporaries and refused to limit the possibilities for poetry to a narrow set of formal strategies or an exclusive vision of their literary past. Most simply put, my goal is to provide a way of appreciating the variety of poetries written in our time—without necessarily requiring us to choose between them.

Writing this book, my greatest debt has been to the poets who responded so generously to my discussions of their work: they became the best critics I could hope for. I want particularly to remember Amy Clampitt, who, shortly before her death, offered several important additions to my argument. I’m also grateful for the help of Robert Boyers, Bonnie Costello, Frederick Crews, Barbara Jordan, Susan Meigs, Adam

Parkes, Christopher Ricks, John Shoptaw, and Willard Spiegelman. Langdon Hammer not only read this book as it grew, page by page, but fueled my interest with his own ongoing study of American poetry. Joanna Scott's imagination sustained me when my own failed.

The Guggenheim Foundation and Worcester College, Oxford, provided time to write, and I'm grateful to David Bradshaw and Richard Smethurst for making my stay in Oxford so memorable. My research assistants, Mary Kelkenberg, Alyssa O'Brien, and Newell Young, never failed to find the material I needed. And the librarians of Amherst College, Vassar College, the Walnut Hill School, the Henry E. Huntington Library, the Rosenbach Museum and Library, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, and the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library helped me to locate many uncollected and unpublished texts. Earlier versions of several chapters of the book have appeared in *American Literary History*, *ELH*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Salmagundi*, *The Southern Review*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Future of Modernism*, ed. Hugh Witemeyer (Ann Arbor, 1997).

The dedication records my debt to a critic who, more than any other I've known, embodies the qualities of openness and generosity that I've tried in this book to document and, however fitfully, to emulate.

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WHAT WAS
POSTMODERN
POETRY?

Modern poetry holds in solution contradictory tendencies which, isolated and exaggerated in postmodernism, look startlingly opposed both to each other and to the earlier stages of modernism. This sentence was almost written by Randall Jarrell. Where Jarrell said *romantic* and *modern*, I've substituted *modern* and *postmodern*, and the resulting sentence not only offers a good way to begin thinking about the vicissitudes of American poetry over the last several decades; it also reminds us that those vicissitudes follow a pattern we've seen before.¹

The words I've put in Jarrell's mouth are his own. Jarrell was by no means the first person to use the word *postmodern* (it appeared as early as 1926 in discussions of modernist theology); nor was he the earliest poet to feel that literary modernism had slipped into the past: "It is now possible," wrote Laura Riding and Robert Graves in 1928, "to reach a position where the modernist movement itself can be looked at with historical (as opposed to contemporary) sympathy."² But by rethinking the vexed relationship of romantic and modern poetry, Jarrell was clearing the ground for the first fully meaningful discussion of poetry written in response to the work of T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore: "Who could have believed," he asked in 1942, "that modernism

would collapse so fast?"³ Today, more than half a century later, our sense of modernism continues to change, but our characterizations of postmodern poetry too often depend on outmoded notions of modernism. While most readers of modern poetry have long since rejected the narratives supplied by New Critics like Allen Tate or Cleanth Brooks, the same readers often cling to those narratives in order to exaggerate the formal and political idiosyncrasy of postmodern poetry.

One version of that exaggeration is evident in this passage from John Ashbery's "The System."

For many weeks you have been exploring what seemed to be a profitable way of doing. You discovered that there was a fork in the road, so first you followed what seemed to be the less promising, or at any rate the more obvious, of the two branches until you felt that you had a good idea of where it led. Then you returned to investigate the more tangled way, and for a time its intricacies seemed to promise a more complex and therefore a more practical goal for you, one that could be picked up in any number of ways so that all its faces or applications could be thoroughly scrutinized. And in so doing you began to realize that the two branches were joined together again, farther ahead; that this place of joining was indeed the end, and that it was the very place you set out from, whose intolerable mixture of reality and fantasy had started you on the road which has now come full circle.

Having recognized these sentences as a rewriting of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," should we then say that Frost believes that "all the difference" depends on our ability to choose between two different paths, while Ashbery shows such a choice to be specious, revealing difference to be a condition of our existence rather than the result of conscious decisions? That's the story Marjorie Perloff tells about these two poets, but it depends on our reading Frost as a poet of greeting-card wisdom rather than the poet who, in "The Road Not Taken," is like Ashbery undermining easy ideas of difference and suggesting that we live in some kind of indeterminacy.⁴ The speaker of Frost's poem wants to believe that the choice of one path over another has made all the difference, but his equivocations reveal that the paths make no difference at all.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

It's tempting to think of Ashbery's prose as an advance on Frost's tetrameters, but once we recognize the equivocations of "The Road Not

Taken" ("as just as fair," "perhaps the better," "really about the same"), then Ashbery's "System" seems more like a repetition of Frost's skepticism than a turn away from it.

Those of us who *tell* the stories of postmodern poetry are usually more invested in polemical distinctions than those of us who *live* them. Yet the most common story was supplied at least in part by the poet whose career it justifies. Reduced to its barest outline, the story goes like this: after writing several books of highly praised New Critical well-wrought urns (objective and impersonal), Robert Lowell understood that poetry could be fragmentary, subjective, personal, and the result was *Life Studies*, a watershed in twentieth-century poetry. *Life Studies* itself tells this story; the volume begins with formal poems that recall the high-church values of Lowell's earlier work, moving on to the free verse anxieties of poems about his family and his mental collapses. Lowell sometimes spoke of this movement as a "breakthrough back into life," as if free verse were not one kind of form among many but a movement beyond the merely literary.⁵ Psychic and political health, it seems, could be achieved by breaking the pentameter.

This "breakthrough" narrative offers a narrow and inadequate reading even of Lowell's career. But in the "Age of Lowell," as Irvin Ehrenpreis dubbed it, readers found a similar aesthetic "breakthrough" (often accompanied by a psychological "breakdown") in the careers of many of Lowell's contemporaries, especially John Berryman and Theodore Roethke: a poet's status was often measured by the strength of what one reviewer called, apropos of Roethke, "the famous 'breakthrough' that it is the custom to talk about."⁶ The story of Lowell's life in poetry became, as he said in his late poem "For John Berryman," the story of a generation.

Really we had the same life,
the generic one
our generation offered.

Berryman might have approved of these lines, for in his later years he sometimes agreed with Lowell's sense of the limitations of Eliot's modernism. Berryman said this about the structure of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*: "let's have narrative, and at least one dominant personality, and no fragmentation! In short, let us have something spectacularly NOT *The Waste Land*." And this about the structure of *The Dream Songs*: "The reason I call it one poem is the result of my strong disagreement with Eliot's line—the impersonality of poetry."⁷

More is at stake here than one generation's need to distinguish itself from an earlier one. Inasmuch as there is a common theory of postmodern American poetry, the "breakthrough" narrative underwrites it,

ostensibly explaining the careers not only of Lowell and Berryman but of W. S. Merwin, Frank O'Hara, Adrienne Rich, and many more recent poets. In *From Modern to Contemporary* James Breslin employs the story of Lowell's career—emphasizing its implicit equation of modernism with formalism, mere craft, and stultifying hierarchy—to account for the “breakthrough” of American poetry at large: “At this moment of crisis, poetry once again became disruptive—critical of its culture, of its immediate past, of itself; by way of repudiating orthodox modernism, American poetry once again became modern, ‘of the present.’”⁸ Modernism emerges from this narrative as a movement whose poems are easily characterized as traditional, impersonal, and hierarchical. And though the narrative has been useful, our continuing faith in it depends (to put it somewhat simply) on a reading of *The Waste Land* as a unified and impersonal poem—something Cleanth Brooks could muster fifty years ago but which is difficult to sustain, given that our knowledge of Eliot's career has increased along with our suspicion of values like unity and impersonality.

Now that Lowell's poetry has lost some of its prestige, the “breakthrough” narrative is no longer invoked quite so explicitly as it was two decades ago; nevertheless, its assumptions are perpetuated by many poets and critics who, whatever their differences, agree that a great deal of cultural weight depends on the choice of poetic form. More often than not, apparently opposed formal means are enlisted in defense of identical social ends: while some readers maintain that a rhymed and metered poem “is political in the sense that it is separating itself from the people,” others insist that “by removing meter and rhyme” from poetry, poets are “alienating the audience.”⁹ An easy confluence of formal and social vision is assumed, and almost any new development in American poetry is heralded at the expense of a previous “breakthrough,” now seen to be either too timid or too severe.

In contrast, readers who take the longest view of contemporary poetry have little use for the oversimplifications characteristic of the “breakthrough” narrative (though it is telling that, until recently, Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler have had little to say about Eliot at all). Robert Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry*, published in 1976, powerfully undermined the logic of the “breakthrough” by stressing the rhetoricity of all poetic forms, however “open” or “closed” we imagine them to be. And more recently, in one of the subtlest accounts of contemporary American poetry, Vernon Shetley has argued that our most interesting poets “tried to find some kind of middle way between the alternatives of a poetry descended from Eliot” and “the oppositional poetics of a figure like [Allen] Ginsberg.”¹⁰

From my perspective, the “middle way” was found not between

Eliot and Ginsberg (however emblematically these names are employed) but within an Eliotic inheritance that poets found more varied and accommodating than most readers recognized; even the New Criticism offered Ashbery support in unpredictable ways. So while it's true that Thomas Hardy, Stevens, or H.D. have often served as alternate models, it is important to recognize that Ginsberg's poetry is in some ways a logical extension of Eliot's contradictory body of work. Those poets who were in the most literal sense postmodern (poets who, whatever their formal choices, were deeply aware of writing after the full flush of modernist achievement) did not stake their originality on a narrow reading of their forebears.

It was not until the publication of *The Waste Land* manuscript that most of Eliot's critics began to see that the poem was, in Eliot's own words, not so much an austere "criticism of the contemporary world" as the anguished "relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life."¹¹ But prescient readers had seen this side of Eliot long before the manuscripts revealed it. When Wallace Stevens read *The Waste Land* he ventured that "if it is the supreme cry of despair it is Eliot's and not his generation's."¹² Randall Jarrell, who planned for years to write a book on Eliot's "psychological roots," agreed.

Won't the future say to us in helpless astonishment: "But did you actually believe that all those things about objective correlatives, classicism, the tradition, applied to *his* poetry? Surely you must have seen that he was one of the most subjective and daemonic poets who ever lived, the victim and helpless beneficiary of his own inexorable compulsions, obsessions? From a psychoanalytical point of view he was far and away the most interesting poet of your century. But for you, of course, after the first few years, his poetry existed undersea, thousands of feet below that deluge of exegesis, explication, source listing, scholarship, and criticism that overwhelmed it."¹³

As Jarrell points out, poets of his generation had to contend not only with Eliot's own critical pronouncements; some of the New Critics exaggerated and codified the poetics of tradition and impersonality, disguising aspects of Eliot's poetry that Stevens could sense early on. In 1948 Berryman reviewed a large collection of what were by then canonical readings of Eliot by I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, F. O. Matthiessen, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks. "The book contains most of the best known studies of Mr. Eliot's work," said Berryman, "and will be useful." He had one serious complaint: "Eliot is found 'unified' and 'impersonal' everywhere, unutterably 'traditional,' and so on, all his

favorite commendations. . . . Perhaps we have not got it yet. Perhaps in the end this poetry which the commentators are so eager to prove impersonal will prove to be personal, and will also appear then more terrible and more pitiful even than it does now."¹⁴

Berryman was right, of course. When he wrote these sentences, he was already at work on *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, and the effort to produce a poem with a dominant personality seems in this context an extension of Eliot's sensibility rather than a rejection of it. Berryman's later statements rejecting "Eliot's line" consequently seem more cagey than sincere, directed not so much at Eliot himself as at a critical establishment that smoothed his work into a "doctrine." The story of Berryman's career should explain that he was able to write *The Dream Songs* not only by resisting commonplace notions of Eliotic modernism but also by building on aspects of Eliot that most garden-variety literary critics did not want to notice.

But if the "breakthrough" narrative can account for Berryman's career only partially, it cannot account at all for the careers (to name only a few) of Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Wilbur, or John Ashbery. Because the narrative is often cast in the terms of masculine fortitude, it has helped to disguise the importance of many female poets. And male poets like Wilbur, who continues to work in traditional meters and forms, have often appeared "feminized" to readers who accept the terms of the narrative uncritically. Such poets have also been assumed, solely on the evidence of their formal choices, to be politically conservative. "The sociopolitical complacency and conservatism of . . . Eisenhower's eight-year administration," says one recent critic of postmodern poetry, "finds its match in a poetics overawed by tradition and ruled by its sense of decorum."¹⁵ Common as this assumption is, it will make no sense of Wilbur, whose associations with the Communist Party were investigated by the FBI; nor will it make much sense of Ashbery, who remains a practicing Episcopalian. Wilbur himself has rightly rejected the attribution "of a kind of intrinsic sanity and goodness and even moral quality to received forms. . . . There's nothing essentially good about a meter in itself."¹⁶ To believe otherwise is to transform an arbitrary, historically conditioned coincidence (in its most vulgar form, free verse and free thinking) into a kind of transcendental certainty.

The association of personal or social liberation with formal transgression (and the association of any ordering principle, even rhyme, with tyranny) is a good example of what Jürgen Habermas has called the "false negation of culture": everyday life "could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere—art."¹⁷ As Habermas suggests in "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," responding to a variety of postmodern theorists, no conception

of aesthetic modernism will offer terms that account adequately for the social project of modernity at large. Consequently, our sense of what constitutes a postmodern literature cannot be limited (as Fredric Jameson once put it) to "a particular style" of writing.¹⁸ The poems of both John Ashbery and Richard Wilbur are shaped by a keen awareness of what is at stake in writing after Eliot and Stevens; their very different styles embody equally legitimate responses to modernism. And inasmuch as Ashbery and Wilbur are both deeply skeptical of the attribution of social power to any particular poetic form, the two poets have a great deal in common.

Elizabeth Bishop shared their skepticism. With the Lowell who in 1957 told William Carlos Williams, "it's great to have no hurdle of rhyme and scansion between yourself and what you want to say most forcibly,"¹⁹ Bishop could not agree, because she understood that all forms of poetry, as linguistic confections, offer one or another screen through which the world is experienced. But a lingering distrust of conventional form continues to skew our sense of her development, despite the fact that she has become the most admired American poet of her generation. Many of Bishop's readers have attempted to increase her prestige by misrepresenting her subtle and gradual development as a breakthrough to freer forms, franker confessions, and more forceful politics. This is to read Bishop through a dated sense of modernism—even as that sense of modernism is in other contexts superseded. In contrast, William Meredith has hinted at Bishop's real importance by suggesting that "she will yet civilize and beguile us from our silly schools. The Olsons will lie down with the Wilburs and the Diane Wakoskis dance quadrilles with the J. V. Cunninghams."²⁰ Because of her personal knowledge of Eliot (among other things), Bishop understood his work as if she had read *The Waste Land* manuscript, and her sense of her own relationship to modernism was consequently not so clearly or comfortably antagonistic.

Lowell often said that it was Williams who catalyzed his conversion to free verse in *Life Studies*; other times, thinking of "Skunk Hour," he gave the honor to Bishop. Readers like Breslin have tended to focus on Williams because it's easier to contrast his values with the New Criticism, telling the story of Lowell's career as a linear trajectory rather than as an attractively circuitous muddle. In my reading, Bishop was the crucial influence precisely because it was not possible for Lowell—as it is not possible for us today—to align her work clearly with one camp or another. "You can see," Lowell once said, "that Bishop is a sort of bridge between Tate's formalism and Williams' informal art."²¹ In *For the Union Dead* (more than in *Life Studies*), Lowell began to write poems with a less assertive kind of rhetoric, poems he found more amenable

to the vicissitudes of personal experience. Bishop herself learned to write such poems by reading, very carefully, the modernist poetry that many of her contemporaries thought of as closed and impersonal.

By no means are all notions of postmodernism identical with antimodernism, whatever the currency of oppositional narratives in discussions of American poetry. While Jameson does maintain that postmodernism occurs when modernist works of art become "a set of dead classics," he also argues—more productively—that works embodying "the most classical high modernist aesthetic values" often seem "capable of a thoroughgoing rewriting into the postmodern text." Unwilling to establish a postmodern canon in clearly oppositional terms, Jameson extends this benefit of the doubt not only to more easily recuperated moderns (Roussel, Stein, or Duchamp) but to "mainstream moderns" such as Flaubert, Stevens, and Joyce. Yet when confronted by the poet who seems to me the most crucial representative of the mainstream, even this act of generosity is curtailed: "are all the classics of yesteryear rewritable in this fashion? . . . is T. S. Eliot recuperable?"²² Within the world of American poetry, Eliot has been recuperated many times over. Randall Jarrell's sense of a future for poetry became possible when he understood that what passed for Eliotic notions of modernism were far from inevitable; those notions could not even account adequately for Eliot himself.

In 1934 Wallace Stevens wrote an introduction to Williams's *Collected Poems* that Jarrell read closely. "There are so many things to say about [Williams]," said Stevens. "The first is that he is a romantic poet. This will horrify him."²³ Stevens's point was not only polemical, for (as his slightly defensive "Sailing After Lunch" reveals) he felt himself deeply to be a romantic poet. He did hope to shake up other people besides Williams, however, and in a review of Marianne Moore's *Selected Poems* he was willing to say that even Eliot was a romantic. Since Eliot had written the introduction to Moore's poems, surrounding her work with imagist and neoclassical precedents, Stevens's argument was especially provocative. After reading the review in manuscript, Moore told Stevens that his allusion to Eliot would "do him good."²⁴

Having read Stevens on both Williams and Moore, Jarrell saw fissures in what had previously seemed to him the monolithic world of modern poetry—especially as he had been initiated into it by his New Critical teachers, Warren and Tate. In an introduction to his first collection of poems, *The Rage for the Lost Penny* (1940), and two years later in an essay called "The End of the Line," Jarrell was able to say definitively that "'Modern' poetry is, essentially, an extension of romanticism; it is what romantic poetry wishes or finds it necessary to become." When this sentence was published in the early forties, its argument was unheard of, except by devoted readers of Stevens; critical works that

would popularize the argument (like Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image*) lay decades in the future. But Jarrell's purpose was less to characterize modernism than, in revealing it as the end of the romantic line, to speculate about what might come next: "How," he asked, "can poems be written that are more violent, more disorganized, more obscure, more—supply your own adjective—than those that have already been written?"²⁵

For a brief moment in the late thirties, W. H. Auden seemed to Jarrell to make a successful move beyond modernist violence, disorganization, and obscurity: "Auden at the beginning was oracular (obscure, original), bad at organization, neglectful of logic, full of astonishing or magical language, intent on his own world and his own forms; he has changed continuously toward organization, plainness, accessibility, objectivity, social responsibility."²⁵ Jarrell tried to embody these values (both formal and political) in his own first poems—

Love, in its separate being,
Gropes for the stranger, the handling swarm,
Sits like a child by every road
With begging hands, string-dwindled arms

—but almost immediately he thought that this movement in the right direction had gone too far: Dylan Thomas's rejection of plainness and accessibility soon suggested that Auden's poetry represented one more reaction to modern values rather than a potent turn away from them.

While it was clear to Jarrell that modernism had passed, what was to take its place was not so clear. And though he sensed very cannily the affiliations of romantic and modern poetry, he was understandably less adept at sensing the similarly compromised relationship of modernism and whatever was to follow it. "During the course of [my] article," wrote Jarrell in his introduction to *The Rage for the Lost Penny*, "the reader may have thought curiously, 'Does he really suppose he writes the sort of poetry that replaces modernism?'"²⁷ Jarrell declined to answer the question directly, but when John Crowe Ransom reviewed the book, he quoted extensively from Jarrell's characterization of modernism, conjecturing that his precocious student "forbids us to say yet that he is a post-modernist" but "probably he will be."²⁸

Ransom himself was unwilling to suggest what a "post-modernist" poet might look like; he would rely heavily on Jarrell's essay once again when he offered a tentative glimpse of the future in the final pages of *The New Criticism* (1941). Jarrell would offer some more meaningful conjectures in his 1947 review of Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle*.

Mr. Lowell's poetry is a unique fusion of modernist and traditional poetry, and there exist side by side in it certain effects that

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