LANGUAGE AND "THE THINGS THAT ARE THERE": PAUL DE MAN'S "POETIC ATTITUDES" APPLIED TO POST-WWII AMERICAN POETRY

STEPHAN DELBOS

ABSTRACT

In his essay "Process and Poetry" (1956), Paul de Man identifies two types of "poetic attitude," a poetry of process and a poetry of substance. Where de Man illuminates these attitudes by focusing on the content rather than the form of poems written by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Hölderlin, this essay will apply these attitudes to post-war American poets while expanding de Man's consideration to include elements of prosody and their relationship to "process" and "substance." The purpose of this essay is to argue for the applicability of these attitudes to American poets of the era and further to argue that such a critical approach offers fresh views of this work. There are clear examples of de Man's attitudes in poetry written in the US since 1945, and these are reflected in the dominant critical model of this poetry as divided between avant-garde and academic styles. By examining the free verse poetry in Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960), and the formal poetry in Robert Pack, Louis Simpson and Donald Hall's anthology *New Poets of England and America* (1957), this essay will identify poems that exemplify each of de Man's attitudes, before taking into account the Language poetry of the 1970s as a development in American poetry of process. Finally, the essay shall identify a poet who, as de Man argues for Hölderlin, has found "accomplishment" by synthesizing process and substance, writing what have recently been termed "hybrid" poems.

Keywords: Paul de Man; Post-war American Poetry; The New American Poetry

In his essay "Process and Poetry," (1956) Paul de Man identifies two types of "poetic attitude." Using Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire as examples, de Man distinguishes between a "poetry of process," and a "poetry of substance" (de Man 1989: 64). Poetry of process, de Man writes, is primarily concerned with "maintaining itself as consciousness at the expense of the sensuous object" (1989: 71). He posits Mallarmé as a poet of this attitude, citing the prose poem "Midnight" as exemplary, and suggesting that the work "justifies its existence by speaking a truth" (1989: 70). For a poet of this attitude, "the poetic consciousness of becoming maintains itself as self-consciousness. […] Such poetry knows itself fully and is able to account for its own existence" (1989: 70). De Man

contrasts this to a poetry of substance, exemplified by Baudelaire, who insists that art has no place in moments of genuine self-presence:

> Whereas for Baudelaire, truth is a triumph over time, albeit a momentary one, a space from which time has been eliminated, and a purification of space inside which time appears as a negative and destructive element, Mallarmé, on the contrary, finds the essence of truth in the synthesis of the double significance, both spatial and temporal, of the term "presence." (1989: 69)

De Man finds a profound trust of language in Mallarmé, and a belief that through language the poet can achieve truth. Because language is a record of self-consciousness, for the poet of process, there is no need to account for the poet's tools in his works of art, according to de Man. In contrast, a poetry of substance like Baudelaire's achieves its end in recapturing "a lost plenitude" (1989: 71). A poet of this attitude is haunted by the past and by exotic places, and believes time is the enemy of the eternal. In seeking to be eternal, or "metatemporal," (1989: 70) a poet writing with this attitude desires to "imprint on the process of becoming, the character of being," to make his mark on the reader and the world (1989: 70). Ultimately, by attaining true presence, metatemporal poetry, or the poetry of substance, seeks to extricate itself from the grasp of time, for if poetry "can attain essential presence, then history can have no hold on it" (1989: 65).

As a mid-point between these two attitudes, de Man posits Hölderlin, who achieved a "genuine poetics" (1989: 71) by allowing his work to oscillate between the poetry of substance and the poetry of process. For Hölderlin, "poetry becomes the putting into language of the failure of the true to found itself" (1989: 66). In other words, poetry is the constant negation of the eternal, and can be interpreted as a "dialectic of intention and desires," according to de Man (1989: 71). By identifying the Hellenic world with the sensuous, and the Occident with the process of becoming, Hölderlin was able to include both within his poetic ken. This attitude is ideal for de Man, because, "by giving in too much to the ease of becoming, poetry is distorted, and thus strays from its authentic vocation" (1989: 74). De Man more clearly defines the poetry he values when he writes: "only when poetry is willing to give up its desires to be concrete and eternal will it be able to find accomplishment" (1989: 75).

The purpose of my consideration of "Process and Poetry" is to apply de Man's poetic attitudes to American poetry written after World War II, to determine whether these attitudes are applicable to American poets of the era. There are clear examples of de Man's attitudes in post-war American poetry, and these are reflected in the dominant critical model of this poetry as two camps split between avant-garde and formal styles. By examining the free verse poetry in Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960), and the formal poetry in Robert Pack, Louis Simpson and Donald Hall's anthology *New Poets of England and America* (1957), I will identify two poems that exemplify each of de Man's attitudes. I shall then look at the Language poetry of the 1970s as a dramatic development in American poetry of process. Finally, I shall identify a poet who, like Hölderlin, has found "accomplishment" (1989: 75) by achieving a synthesis of process and substance. Throughout the essay, I will apply de Man's attitudes to the form as well as the content of these poems, to identify the formal repercussions of each attitude in post-war American poetry.

Process in the New American Poetry

The dominant debate in post-war American poetry has not been one of process versus substance, but rather of formal verse and free verse. Perhaps this is not so far removed from de Man's attitudes as it may at first appear. Robert Creeley, one of the most outspoken apologists for the New American Poetry, seems to describe accurately the poetry of process in his comments on form: "A poetry denies its end in any descriptive act, I mean any act which leaves its attention outside the poem. Description does nothing, it includes the object. […] Poems are not referential, at least not importantly so" (Creeley 1970: 23). Creeley's words seem to have informed much of the New American Poetry, and Creeley's own work, of course. In Creeley's poetry, there is an evident trust in the language of the poem, and an emphasis on it, rather than image, which was central to much of the formal poetry of the era. His poem "The Counterpoint" exemplifies this style. It consists of three couplets:

> Let me be my own fool
> of my own making, the sum of it
>
> is equivocal.
> One says of the drunken farmer:
>
> leave him lay off it. And this is
> the explanation. (Allen 1960: 78)

The poem is not clearly descriptive. The only phrases that suggest image or reference are "fool," and "drunken farmer." Largely, the poem consists of spare language that has more rhythmic weight than evocative power. The couplets direct the pacing of the poem and give it heft on the page, but the form of the poem seems to have been imposed by the language itself, and the lack of referentiality forces the poem back on itself in examination. Such a poem does not "long after a lost world," (de Man 1989: 73) trying to capture the realness of objects or artefacts, as does de Man's poetry of substance. This is a poetry of process that does not seek to capture the physical world, but rather a mental state, a mode of being. In other words, it seeks to capture the truth that lies beyond the merely visual and tangible.

De Man confines his explorations in "Process and Poetry" to the content of the poems. But considering the centrality of formal debates in post-war American poetry, when poets such as Creeley made it their specific task to oppose the formalism of academic verse, any discussion of the poetry of the era must take formal elements into account. One of the clearest dictums regarding form in the New American Poetry is Creeley's pronouncement that "[f]orm is never more than an extension of content," (Allen 1960: 387) as quoted by Charles Olson in his influential free verse manifesto "Projective Verse" (1959). These poets believed that form was an element of poetry inseparable from language itself, and that language, having form by nature of its very existence, gave form to the poem. Received forms were external frames imposed on language. These poets rejected those forms and sought new ones, trusting the actuality of language and believing that language earned its right to exist as a poem by expressing a truth, or a state of

consciousness, rather than as a record of the poet's formal abilities in rhyme and meter, and other obvious elements of traditional form.

Mallarmé offers similar examples. This nineteenth-century French poet is today considered one of the most radical formal innovators in European poetry, having extended beyond the line-by-line form to embrace the page as frame in his poem "Un Coup de Dés" published in 1897. This poem, in which the words are constelled across several pages, is now seen as a precursor to Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, and the concrete and visual poetry that arose in the 1950s, as well as Olson's "Projective Verse" and the concept of a breath-based poetics that, according to Olson, utilized the "large area of the whole poem […] the FIELD" (Allen 1960: 391) much as Mallarmé's poem had.

Much of the New American Poetry, like that written and advocated by Creeley and Olson, can be read under de Man's poetry of process. Formally, these poets seem to pay particular attention to the layout of the poems on the page. Theirs is a poetry of process in terms of the unfolding of thought and perception, and in terms of the unfolding of the poem in the process of reading, as Olson directs: "And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!"(Allen 1960: 388). The poem therefore achieves a kind of presence in time, and in the space of the page, as de Man suggests a poetry of process does (de Man 1989: 69).

Olson's theories about form, poetry and language, which align with the poetry of process, were developed more explicitly in Language Poetry, which emerged in the San Francisco Bay area in the early 1970s. Concerned with language itself more than its ability to capture the world through reference, Language Poetry often makes language and its utterance in time the subject of the poem. Indeed, many of these poems make virtually no reference beyond the confines of the poem and the language of which it is composed, and in fact often stymie logical coherence or sense. A poetry eschewing logical sense is by definition not a poetry of substance, as the signifier is freed from the dominance of the signified, and thus nothing physical is "captured" by the language. This state is inverted in the poetry of substance, as the language itself is secondary to the thing described, be it a far-off island, the scent of a woman's hair, or the "flowers, skies, and setting suns" that de Man quotes in Baudelaire (de Man 1989: 68).

A selection from "The Maintains" by Language poet Clark Coolidge will exemplify this dramatic poetry of process. The poem appears traditional, utilizing tercets and quatrains, yet it seems cobbled from individual words, containing nearly no referents, and thus it does not encourage the reader to move, in consciousness or imagination, beyond the confines of the page. As decreed by Creeley, there is virtually no description in the poem:

> laurel ratio sharp or hard
> instrumental triple to or fro
> granule in award
>
> one to whom is made
>
> nave
> spectacle
> as the near wheel (Silliman 2007: 237)

Moments of logical clarity are present, but even the words that point beyond the poem: "nave," "bean," or the momentary logic of the first two lines, or between lines four and five, do not bring coherence to the piece as a whole. Much of the language of the poem functions more as rhythmic units than signifiers, guiding the reading of the poem in terms of pause and pacing, rather than developing images. It must be stated, however, that not all poets and critics would agree that such poetry is devoid of meaning. It is rather that the meaning is "self-embodied" (Bernstein 1992: 18) in the language of the poem itself, according to Charles Bernstein, whose comments on form in Language Poetry echo Creeley's regarding organic form:

> … the meaning is not absent or
> deferred but self-embodied as the poem
> in a way that is not transferable to another code
> or rhetoric. (1992: 18)

There are many parallels in the work of poets who follow Bernstein's or Creeley's suggestions regarding form, and the poetry of process de Man describes in his essay. More could be said regarding the evolution of the poetry of process in post-war American poetry, but it is necessary now to turn to de Man's other poetic attitude: The poetry of substance.

Substance in the New Poets

In seeking to recapture what de Man calls a lost plenitude, an erstwhile oneness with the physical world through verse, poets of substance reach out to the world, address it and try to caress it, to capture it in language (de Man 1989: 71). This desire is evident in much of the formal poetry written in America in the decades following World War II. This poetry was represented in Robert Pack, Louis Simpson, and Donald Hall's anthology, *New Poets of England and America* (1957). Sometimes this desire, which may be otherwise described as longing, is metaphorical, and at other times it is literal, as in the case of James Wright's poem "To the Ghost of a Kite," which explicitly addresses an object from the physical world. The narrator speaks to a kite, lamenting the passing of summer, and all its metaphysical implications. By attempting to capture the essence of the kite in language, the poem becomes an attempt to capture the plenitude of summer, the farthest season from which the poem begins:

> Winter has wrecked the legend of your wings
> And thrown you down beside the cold garage.
> The silken gold that caught the air at large
> Wrinkles and fades among some rusted springs.
> There was a wind that sang below your breast,
> Astonished air blown seaward on your breath.
> That summer sound, lifted away and lost,
> Mutters around the corners of the earth.
> …

> Ghost of a dragon, tell me how to charm
> The spirit back to fill the body now … (Hall, Pack, Simpson 1957: 336)

Addressing an object from the physical world, the poem expresses longing for something that has been lost. Just as Baudelaire ached for worlds of sensory delight and freedom that had long passed, the narrator in Wright's poem longs for the grace of summer, and wishes "to build / Some high magnificence to last as long / As the clear vision of the summer child." Similarly to the poems of Baudelaire, time is the enemy in this poem, hastening us forward to darker seasons, age, regret, and, finally, death.

The formal elements organize the poem and allow it to achieve an absorbing narrative. Rather than enacting the process of language unfolding in time, the poem presents a unified, evocative expression. As the lines move toward conclusion, the emotional picture of the kite and its meaning for the speaker is more apparent. This gesture inverts Creeley's desire for non-descriptive poetry.

Perhaps there is no style of poem more indebted to and bound up in substance than the ekphrastic poem, which is a "detailed description of an image, primarily visual" (Greene et al. 2012: 393). This type of poem points directly beyond, or rather through itself, to a painting, and seeks to capture the image, or to evoke its power through language. Donald Hall's poem "Munch's Scream" also featured in the *New Poets* anthology, is a fine example of the ekphrastic poem. It is divided into two parts, the first of which more or less accurately describes the painting, while the second moves into a consideration of aesthetics, and poetry. The poem begins:

> Observe. Ridged, raised, tactile, the horror
> of the skinned head is there. It is skinned
> which had a covering up before,
> and now is nude, and is determined
>
> by what it perceives … (Hall, Pack Simpson 1957: 96)

Opening with a clear directive, "observe," the poem immediately points through itself to an object in the real world: Munch's famous painting. The first half of the poem is taken with describing, in rhyming quatrains, the painting, and also the acts of perception and interpretation:

> … Habit foists
> conventional surrender to one
>
> response in vision, but it fails here,
> where the partaking viewer is freed
> into the under-skin of his fear. (1957: 96)

"Munch's Scream" is concerned with the interaction between man and art, that is, between man and the physical world. Moreover, the poem is concerned with the effect that art has on man, and the evocative power of objects. This aligns the poem with what de Man calls the poetry of substance. What is most fascinating about this poem in terms

of de Man's poetic attitudes is the conclusion, in which Hall seems to describe the method of the poetry of substance explicitly:

> So the poet, the talker, aims his
> words at the object, and his words go
> faster and faster, and now he is
> like a cyclotron, breaking into
>
> the structure of things by repeated
> speed and force in order to lay bare
> in words, naturally, unworded
> insides of things, the things that are there. (1957: 96)

According to Hall, by focusing language on the physical world, the poet illuminates it, and lays it bare, thus allowing him to recapture and present the essence of the natural world, the "unworded/insides of things […] that are there." Rather than using language as an end in itself, then, poets of substance, such as Hall, Wright, or Baudelaire, use language as a tool with which the physical world may be illuminated, and the essence of things recaptured. These poets are thus set in contrast to those who favor an attitude of process – poets who are more interested in tracking the development of thought through language.

De Man's attitudes are clear in post-war American poetry. But de Man also identifies Hölderlin as a unifying figure capable of both attitudes. If such a poet were evident in post-war American poetry, one likely place to search would be the anthology *American Hybrid* (2009), which purports to identify a recent trend in American poetry combining the tendencies of the New American Poetry with the more traditional poetry represented by Hall's anthology. In her introduction to the anthology, the editor Cole Swensen defines the hybrid poem as follows:

> Today's hybrid poem might engage such conventional approaches as narrative that presumes a stable first person, yet complicates it by disrupting the linear temporal path, or by scrambling the normal syntactical sequence – Or it might foreground recognizably experimental modes such as illogicality or fragmentation, yet follow the strict formal rules of a sonnet or a villanelle. […] Hybrid poets access a wealth of tools, each one of which can change dramatically depending on how it is combined with others and the particular role it plays in the composition. (Swensen and St. John 2009: xxi)

The evolution from formalism to free verse is common among post-war American poets, including James Wright, whose later work abandoned the strict formal qualities of his early poetry, like "To the Ghost of a Kite." Such poets, it could be said, oscillate from one poetic attitude to another over the course of a career. It is less common that a poet completes that oscillation over the course of a single book, or even more rarely, a single poem. Yet it does happen.

Robert Hass is an example of a poet who has achieved such fluidity, ranging from the formal poems in his first book, *Field Guide* (1973), through his translations and incorporation of poets as diverse as the Japanese poet Issa and the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer. While Hass does not venture quite as far into the poetry of process as the

Language poets, his poem "The Garden of Delight," collected in *American Hybrid*, moves from a poetry of process to a poetry of substance, almost line by line.

> The floor hurts so much it whines
> whichever way they step
> as if it had learned the trick
> of suffering.
> Poor floor.
> This is the garden of delight,
> a man pointing at a woman
> and a bird perched
> on a cylinder of crystal
> watching. (2009: 1984)

Hass begins with a poetry of substance: The poem refers directly to the floor, grounding itself in the physical world and conjuring an allegorical setting in which "they," who are soon revealed to be a man and a woman, can unfold within the narrative. Yet, the fifth line of the poem, "poor floor," shifts from the clear referential description of the floor, to abstract commentary on the floor, and does so with rhyme, which calls attention to itself as one of the few instances of rhyme in the poem. This one-line sentence does not further the image of the floor that has been created in the first four lines, but rather moves the narrative away from the floor and calls attention to the process of the narrator's interpretation of the floor, and the language he uses to voice that interpretation.

Furthermore, we can see how the positioning of this one-line sentence between two longer, more descriptive sentences, makes the line work as a buffer both conceptually and rhythmically, and thus functions in a style more reminiscent of Coolidge's one-word lines than the rest of this poem. Thus, Hass oscillates between a poetry of substance in the first four lines to a poetry of process in the fifth line, before resuming his substantive evocation of the floor in the fifth line. The fact that he goes on to describe the "garden of delight" that the title suggests aligns the poem with de Man's reading of the longing evident in the Baudelairean poetry of substance. Surely the garden of delight is lost plenitude par excellence.

De Man concludes his essay by insisting "only when poetry is willing to give up its desire to be concrete and eternal will it be able to find accomplishment" (de Man 1989: 75). One can conjecture that, for de Man, this might be achieved in two ways: By a poetry that insists on the process of becoming, that is, a pure poetry of process, or by a poetry that oscillates between becoming and substance. It would seem that some post-war American poets such as Hass have achieved the same oscillation that de Man describes in Hölderlin. Perhaps it is most accurate to say some poets of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have achieved a poetry of substantive process.

Applying de Man's poetic attitudes to post-war American poetry brings new points of view and possibilities to a debate that is usually limited to considerations of poetic form, to the exclusion of other important social, political, racial, and gender-based elements and implications. There have been other modes of inquiry that parallel de Man's attitudes, including Charles Bernstein's modes of "absorption" and "anti-absorption," which he explores in his essay "Artifice of Absorption" (Bernstein 1992: 9). But where even the

most liberal American poetry critics seem hesitant to move beyond questions of form, de Man inhabits a critical space well beyond these limits. His interpretation of poetic attitudes is both illuminating and promising, as these attitudes point to new methods of inquiry and interpretations of questions that have dominated the critical discourse on American poetry for more than fifty years. While de Man does not comment specifically on form in his essay, it is possible to draw conclusions about the form of the poems in which his attitudes are visible. Doing so not only broadens the critical debate about form in post-war American poetry, it opens up the possibility of other modes of discourse on this rich and at times controversial body of poetry.

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JAZYK A „VĚCI, KTERÉ EXISTUJÍ": DE MANOVY „POETICKÉ POSTOJE" VZHLEDEM K AMERICKÉ POVÁLEČNÉ POEZII

Resumé

Paul de Man ve svém eseji Proces a poezie („Process and Poetry", 1956) rozlišuje dva typy básnického postoje („poetic attitude"): poezii procesu a poezii podstaty. Tento esej aplikuje dané postoje na díla poválečných amerických básníků a rozšiřuje de Manovy úvahy o zahrnutí prvků prosodie a jejich vztahu k „procesu" a „podstatě". V poezii napsané v USA po roce 1945 nacházíme jasné příklady de Manových postojů. Ty se odráží i v převládajícím kritickém modelu poezie tohoto období, který ji vnímá jako rozdělenou na avantgardní a akademickou. Pomocí zkoumání poezie psané volným veršem v antologii Donalda Halla *Nová americká poezie* (*The New American Poetry*, 1960) a formální poezie v antologii *Noví básníci Anglie a Ameriky* (*New Poets of England and America*, 1957) Roberta Packa, Louise Simpsona a Donalda Halla identifikuje tento esej básně, které ilustrují de Manovy postoje, a poté se zamýšlí nad „Language poetry" sedmdesátých let minulého století jako nad americkou poezií procesu.

Stephan Delbos
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague
stephan.delbos@ff.cuni.cz