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Approaching History and the Ambitions of the Modernist Epic

Hart Crane, Basil Bunting, Amon Liner, T. S. Eliot, Louis Zukofsky, William Harmon, W. C. Williams, Ron Bayes, Charles Olson, Ronald Johnson, Ezra Pound—these poets, among many others, have written long poems in distinctly modernist manner, poems which bear strong family resemblances and share important aims. *Approaching History*, of which a small but characteristic selection is showcased in this issue of *Iron Mountain Review*, adds the name of Michael Martin to the list of those poets who have worked in this ambitious mode.

The modernist long poem is a curious affair and not easily described. It may be that Martin's title pins down the most important common goal of all these poems. And the tentativeness of the verb, "approaching," indicates some of the difficulty inherent in the nature of the project. For the central question broached by all these poems, from Pound's *Cantos* to Ron Bayes' *Fram*, is: What is the relationship of culture to the individual life in the contemporary world? Or, what constant qualities of history (if any) are exemplified or illustrated by our isolated modern biographies?

It is a question hard to answer (and hard to dramatize) under any circumstances, but the modernist poet makes the job more difficult by complicating the terms of the question. By "culture" he means both global culture and universal history; the culture he attempts to employ and to delineate in his poems is not composed of the most common and familiar of historical referents, but of the wayward and the obscure and even the seemingly arbitrary historical detail. Charles Olson insists upon the relevance of Mayan codices to contemporary experience; William Harmon brings to bear the ironies of bureaucratic statistical reports; Pound bombards an individual contemporary life with a whole card catalogue of historic and artistic allusions. "An epic poem," he said, "is a long poem containing history"; but it is soon apparent that Pound's redefinition of this classical genre is too self-gratulatory. No poem that is not a coherent narrative can "contain" history; it can only select certain historical facts and attempt to constellate them in striking and informative patterns. The modern epic poet's method of composition is rather like archeology: With a highly limited set of images, details, quotations, and personages, he attempts to imply a living and continuous culture that has survived through the centuries and still prevails over the accidental nature of the current historical situation. There are repetitions, likenesses, correspondences, atavisms, Ideal Forms, archetypes, and so forth, which demonstrate both a historical and an aesthetic cohesiveness beneath the confused surface of contemporary event.

This latter is another complicating factor in the poet's ambition to show the force of culture upon the individual life in the contemporary world. His "contemporary world" is a disintegrated chaos; it is formless and senseless and incomprehensible. It is a phantasmagoric wasteland without organizing principles or guiding influence; it is mere inhumane randomness, a despoiling of the soul. So far as I can think, this depiction of the contemporary world is common to every modernist long poem, bar none. The resulting difficulty is that the reader is presented with one set of fragments representing what amounts to "order," that is, to the genuine though perhaps hidden cohesiveness of history and global culture, and also with another set of fragments which represents fragmentation itself, the confusion of contemporary experience. We are expected to judge one set of fragments as *good* (the set that contains the legends of Mount Fuji, the Mayan codices, the gestes of Malatesta) and the other set (the one containing environmental pollution, contemporary political knavery, the tasteless artifacts of mass production) as *bad*.

Which is to say that the poet expects his readers to share with him a central aesthetic doctrinal agreement as well as a fair amount of detailed historical knowledge.

The method of juxtaposing these two large sets of fragments so that they may contrast with and comment upon one another requires a modernist epic hero. The hero of the contemporary long poem is a little like Ulysses but not much like Achilles; he is often like Nestor but rarely like Diomedes; he is fashioned very much on the order of Philoctetes but is in no way similar to Ajax. The modernist epic hero is not a slayer, hardly a doer at all; he has Nestor's wise sense of history, Ulysses' irony and persuasive rhetoric, and the longing, the enforced passivity, and the inner anguish of Philoctetes. He is a wanderer, usually an exile, in time as well as in space; his job is to perceive and to report; he is not an integral person, a single identity, but a collocation of different personalities drawn from different historical contexts in order to observe the issues currently at hand in the poem. Not even his name is stable; sometimes he is Confucius, sometimes John Adams, or he is all the names that go to make up the personality of Tiresias. This multiplicity of personality helps him to become invisible, to report on scenes in such manner that his knowledge of them seems authoritative and remains unquestioned. But this multiple personality may also point towards his Philoctetes-like wound, his terrified uncertainty about his place in the world and the value of his judgments. What can the powerless exile do but witness? And yet how trustworthy can the witness of the exile be, since he no longer is engaged

with the matters that he observes?

The narrator of *Approaching History* is in some important respects typical of the epic heroes of modernism. His identity is ambiguous; he is a Protean figure with various names—"Mike," "Jack," "J.M.," "J.," "Je," "J'mes"—and he is a wanderer who has traveled extensively in Europe and America. He sees himself as an exile in a very special sense; having suffered through a divorce, he feels cut off from a life that might have been, a happier life (perhaps) that properly belongs to him. He is also an exile in the more ordinary way of the modernist hero: Not sharing the values and purposes of his contemporaries, he is cast out of the mainstream of daily life.

Isolated autobiographical memories, along with gathered scraps of omnivorous reading, constitute the set of fragments that represents for him order and cultural continuity. The set of fragments that represents the chaos of present time is made up mostly of disconnected anecdotes, highly localized incident. The unifying symbol for the nexus of both these kinds of experience, the locus of the confrontation between continuity and chaos, is itself fragmented; it is the shattered rear view mirror of a 1946 Ford car which has been accidentally exhumed but purposefully identified.

The fragmentation of experience is, then, firmly acknowledged in *Approaching History*. But the recognition of fragmentation is pointless unless there is, if not faith, then at least abiding desire for a hidden continuity, a perdurable cohesion, that the seeking mind can find out. I'm not certain that Martin posits such a faith for his narrator-hero, but the longing is there. At one point, considering in the widest possible terms the physical makeup of the universe, from the smallest subnuclear pulse to the largest galactic system, the narrator asks if it really does all fit together and, if it does, where is the place in the scheme for the individual. "If—say—you could only go far enough,/ if you could bore some *time*-well/ into the briefest meson/ in the skies of an atom . . . / . . . if it went on forever/ would you come back to this/ (I point overhead):/ mesons, mosquitoes, red giants . . . / lightning bugs, supernovas . . . / poets talking to potters on a doorstep . . ."

This passage exemplifies one of Martin's constant themes, the doubt that attacks every epic hero about the purpose of his quest. "whatcha do it for then/ pursues my interlocutor/ why throw yr life away." The answer is that it is not throwing one's life away to discover or to create necessary connections in culture and history, connections that make individual personality possible and give meaning to individual intellectual effort. That is the brave answer to self-doubt, but the self-doubt is hardly vanquished; it returns with further questions, further demands.

> to believe in the connections
> to believe in the words . . . .
>
> is this all
>
> no
>
> is this most of it?
>
> No
>
> what is it then the rest of it?
>
> I do not know.

The doubts are inevitable; the hope is that they are only momentary. What aids, what helpmeets, is the poet able to find in his battle against doubt and confusion, against what he finally must regard as chaos? "if you could find the Depot,/ the Collecting Point—/ what would you deposit, forever?"

That's a tough question, and the poet has to be prepared to give a tough and resilient answer. Michael Martin does so, deflecting the bitterness inherent in the question with a handy shield of irony, of self-mockery. The only thing the poet can deposit at the mythical terminal Collecting Point is his work, the product of his art. It is, however, this same art that posed such final questions in the first place, an art that recognizes all too clearly the arbitrary makeshift nature of its own techniques.

Against the ravaging of time, against the fleeting transitoriness of mere event, the poet poses his *symbol*. His symbol is nothing special in itself; in fact, it has no significance at all until the poet chooses it. After this initial preferment, the poet's choice, the symbol begins to acquire significance in itself and to pull other significances toward it, behaving rather like a gravitational field.

But in that necessary first step, the choosing, there is something arbitrary. Why is this object chosen as a symbol and not some other object? If it is in the poet's power actually to confer meaning, then he can confer it on any old thing and make it an important part of his poem.

Martin faces this arbitrariness and makes light of it in a passage that starts out funny and ends quite seriously. The poet's digs are in need of a tonic spate of housecleaning and the situation gives rise to complaint: "why the heck don't you sweep this place out/ at least once a year, I can't even *scream* in here/ choked up in this cussed Dust." Nothing at issue here but sloppy housekeeping, but the poet takes the occasion to muse upon his craft and also, by swift implication, his role in the world. "—Well I said I kinda *like*/ this dust, it's a pretty good Symbol . . .// . . . the Energy in this Symbol is priceless// there aren't many Symbols left/ for us Poets."

What the dust actually symbolizes is the speaker's laziness and talent for humorous self-justification. He begins to indulge his fancy: the dust is a good Symbol because it covers everything indiscriminately, like Light, like Dark, like Rain, like Time, and so on. He is not only mocking the notion of easy symbolism, he is criticizing the idea of dust as a symbol because it is too open and general to have emotional force; it can stand too glibly for too many different things. It is even "like the Snow, softly/ falling all over Ireland etc." The tone is still mocking, but the glancing allusion to James Joyce's story, "The Dead," has interjected a serious note—which for the moment is not sustained. The litany continues its bravura humor; "I luv ma symbol." The dust covers everything in the

cabin, even laying a heavy mantle of irony over a copy of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West.*

At last the self-mockery shades into self-examination, the playful catalogue sheds its burlesque intention and turns serious, unveiling its Whitmanesque underpinnings in the titles given to the wife who complains of the dust: "cabin-mate," "Pilot." And with a muted allusion to T. S. Eliot, the old familiar association of dust with human mortality is asseverated with an intimacy and unexpected tenderness:

> Come here, cabinmate
> go get the broom
>
> open up your hand,
> I'll teach you how it feels
>
> Pilot, I'll show you fear
>
> Every teaspoon in the drainrack
> hair of head & palm of hand
> holds a little, each
> of your mortal share.

I have spent a fair amount of time on this passage, less for its intrinsic importance than for its representative quality. It shows the character of the narrator-hero: learned, hapless, absorbed in his great task but skeptical about it at the same time, desultory, humorous, serious, playful, and earnest. A clutch of contradictions. It is not that his personality is itself fragmented, but rather that it has been deliberately fashioned so that it can mirror the character of the fragmented passing moments, can hear the echoes and feel the impulses that history and culture supply for the most banal of events, the most trivial of circumstances. The cabin needs sweeping, that's all, but this is a situation that *means something.* —No it doesn't. —Well, true, it really doesn't mean anything, but if the poet were serious in choosing for it to mean something, then it very well could, do you understand? —No. It doesn't mean anything.

But then, suddenly, the persiflage goes silent and the final true relationship between the speaker and his cabinmate shows through. Whatever has happened between them, whatever ruptures have taken place for whatever reasons, they are bound together in their common mortality. That is one bond that can never break.

These mercurial shifts of tone and direction are characteristic of *Approaching History,* as they are of all the other modern epics, and they point up one of the paradoxes that animate the poet's ambition. Whatever cultural and aesthetic matrices are laid for the substructure of the poem, they offer no *final* interpretation for the separate and singular stories and events that the poem recounts. In the "dust" passage, the notion of symbolism is not seriously put forward as an explanation of the narrator's behavior. But the notion is present, nevertheless, in the form of humorous commentary; it is still a constant, whether it dominates the individual dramatic scene or appears within it as a supportive detail.

Here is how the poet imagines that his method works: "Once when I was in a city (Cologne) they were excavating under the Cathedral. There were these ditches under the pavement in front of the railroad station. Deep in the trenches there were foreign laborers—Gastarbeiter—from north Africa & Turkey dark swarthy men with miners lamps on their foreheads. Carrying lanterns & picks and jackhammers. I remember peering into the trenches in the late afternoon December light and recognizing people w/ whom I shared a dormitory room in the Klopsinghaus (a kind of Y) for transients where I was staying. In times of need when I am feeling empty I draw on such memories which have imbedded themselves in my consciousness, as images which no longer relate only to the past but to some kind of permanent architectural plan or cross section or strata which is my imago *mundi.*"

We can choose, then, how to characterize the poet's choices of image-complexes he wants to bear the weight of his opus. His choices are arbitrary because he makes them. But then, by the act of making arbitrary choices he creates himself as a poet, thus validating all his choices. On the other hand—on his own evidence—it is apparent that he believes his images choose him. Therefore, his poem is arbitrary because he has not complete control. But then it is not arbitrary because there is nothing willful about it, little that is finally personal; it is not arbitrary because it belongs—in some loose sense of the phrase—to external nature.

In this sort of relationship there is no way to distinguish cause from effect or to mark off the subjective from the objective. Once the poet puts himself in the way of being that special sort of observer-commentator-wanderer-exile who is the protagonist of the modern epic, everything is grist for his mill. He can choose his subjects or not, as he pleases, for when he does not choose he makes the choice of omission; he adds to the synechdochic nature of his poem, he strengthens his overt signs and symbols by eliminating the unspoken unnecessary. To an outsider, the surfaces of modern epics, *Approaching History* included, look like the haphazard collisions of utter accidentals. But once inside, a logic of association begins to sound its music, and nothing seems accidental or arbitrary; indeed it seems that nothing *can* be accidental.

He was advising the scientist, but Louis Pasteur could have been speaking also to the modernist epic poet when he said, "Chance favors the prepared mind." The mind of the poet is to be prepared in such a way that nothing is lost upon it; even the most distant sorts of correspondences are within its range of reception. Martin puts it this way: "isnt there some kind of mirror we re always trying to rub clear deepburied in our systems somekind of reflector telescope which is builtin by the cosmos from which it comes (as Palomar of electrons, silicon, carbon . . . .) to see—& desire to see, to remember & with urgency, to Reflect, what is whole and godlike out There by participating in It, thro some kind of rite that is shared not only with others but with It, so as to resolve some part of this godawful loneliness, & this wide popular movement everywhere toward disintegration and death. & if This out There is still partly undone, & forming/finding Itself as It goes, then does that mirror not reflect w/more fidelity &

definition, more implications, than less, which reflects that process and embodies it by melding it with our instincts & most intimate processes??????"

And in his poem, Michael Martin makes another statement, fashions another short manifesto, that also seems to adhere closely to Pasteur's dictum:

What is the lifetime

but the space we can see
encrypted by those tracks
which disappear

into the trackless Fields
long trains of unknown ones
traverse on their way

toward Those
who labor beyond us
at the end of their supplies.

Gene Dalton/Roanoke Times & World-News