

Some Historical and  
Cultural Contexts of  
Twentieth-Century  
American Poetry



# The Romantic Legacy and the Genteel Tradition

At the beginning of the century the American poetry that found most favor in general circulation magazines, and in magazines devoted entirely to poetry, largely conformed to the expectations firmly established in the nineteenth century as to what a poem should be about, and how it should express itself. Rhymed lyric poetry was to the fore, and such poetry was directly addressed to the reader, usually expressed the feelings of the poet – feelings that were heightened in some way – and, even if the emotions conveyed were not entirely those of pleasure, the lyric quality of the poem, its rhyme, and its summary conclusion, were intended to make reading it a pleasurable, uplifting experience. Arthur Davison Ficke, in a poem titled “Poetry,” and as late as 1912, demonstrated many of the qualities that had been to the fore in the American poetry of the previous two decades, and against which by 1913 many of the modernist poets would rebel. The modernist poets were helped a great deal in this rebellion by the very journal, *Poetry*, published in Chicago, that carried this poem as the first poem of its first issue:

It is a little isle amid bleak seas –  
An isolate realm of garden, circled round  
By importunity of stress and sound,  
Devoid of empery to master these.  
At most, the memory of its streams and bees,  
Borne to the toiling mariner outward-bound,  
Recalls his soul to that delightful ground;  
But serves no beacon toward his destinies.

It is a refuge from the stormy days,  
Breathing the peace of a remoter world  
Where beauty, like the musking dusk of even,  
Enfolds the spirit in its silver haze;

While far away, with glittering banners furled,  
The west lights fade, and stars come out in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

In this definition of poetry, expressed in the traditional form of the sonnet, poetry has no power to direct or comment influentially upon the “stress and sound” of the modern industrial world. Poetry offers instead an escape from that world, via a series of sentimental and conventional abstractions, to a now diminished but nevertheless unsullied island of culture where the pleasures of poetry are appreciated. Some of the same late Romantic imagery had appeared in Yeats’s much more distinguished “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1890), where, homesick on a busy London street, the poet longs for an island with “a hive for the honey-bee” where he can “live alone in the bee-loud glade.”

As James Breslin has pointed out, Ficke’s sonnet was the kind of poetry that William Carlos Williams was reading in the first years of the century as he prepared to write his first self-financed book of poems, locally published in Rutherford, New Jersey, in 1909. Williams’s “On a Proposed Trip South,” which, like his other 1909 poems, he never collected and in fact preferred to forget, reproduces the same landscape. The poet will shortly be leaving the cold north for “a southern flight” – and “shall shortly view / The lush high grasses, shortly see in air / Gay birds and hear the bees make heavy droon.”

Williams sent this volume of poems with pride to his friend Ezra Pound, by then in London and moving into the center of the London avant-garde. Pound replied unsparingly that the poems were decades out of date and that Williams needed to modernize himself, and Pound included a list of writers for his friend to read, none of whom was American. There was nothing for a modernist writer to learn, for Pound, from the American poets of the previous generation. In his poem “The Return” (1912), Pound writes of the “pallid” classical gods returning from decades of neglect, to bring poetry back into the present rather than retreating from it. His near-contemporary poem “Surgit Fama” offers a similar prophecy. Wallace Stevens, in his “Sunday Morning,” of 1915, pointed out that all such islands of retreat, including for Stevens in this poem the Palestine of Christianity, are cultural constructions that become eventually merely rhetorical souvenirs. For Stevens, there is no

isle

Melodious, where spirits gat them home,  
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in James Breslin, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (New York, 1970), 29, and Robert Buttell, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton, 1967), 47.

Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured  
 As April's green endures; or will endure

Again the present world returns to poetry. One way this happens is the American poets' embrace of the concrete pictorialism of imagist poetry, by Williams as much as anybody, as a way to dispel the "haze" of a vision such as Ficke's.

The situation at the turn of the century in American poetry did not give any hint of the extraordinary achievement of American poets that was to come in the 1920s. Nationally, the newspapers and magazines with the highest status and circulation generally treated poetry as a filler item for the corner of columns, and preferred to print formal, uplifting, uncontroversial verse. For reasons connected with the historical development of the continent, the main base of the literary establishment in 1900 was the northeastern seaboard. The main publishers were in Boston and New York, and the oldest universities (any rivals in the South still recovering from the devastation of the Civil War) were also in that region. The universities, writers, and publishers generally looked to England for the standards they wanted to be seen as upholding with equal rigor, and were viewed by writers in much of the rest of the country as in effect a powerful, if provincial, extension of the London scene. A group of poets associated with Harvard, George Santayana, William Vaughn Moody, Trumbull Stickney, and George Cabot Lodge, exemplified the most refined versions of the genteel style. Written in traditional forms, their verse was inspirational, earnest, and carefully crafted, vaguely spiritual, and usually confined to abstractions. Moody is usually considered the most ambitious of the group, although uneven in his execution, while Santayana (in old age many years later the subject of a well-known poem by Wallace Stevens) the most intellectually rigorous. A blander version of this group existed in New York, with E. C. Stedman its leading figure.

The reactions against the genteel style were usually light-hearted, humorous poems by writers who were largely entertainers and newspaper poets. These poems would make fun of the formality and Anglophile values of the genteel style by being in rollicking ballad or regional conversational style, expressly about "American" characters and pursuits – such as farming, fishing, hunting, or baseball. Humor and sentiment ruled the day in these poems, and their most famous exponent, James Whitcomb Riley (1849–1916) was the best selling poet of his day. The African American poet Paul Dunbar (1872–1906) had more serious ambitions, but the racial climate of the time was such that serious verse from a black writer was not particularly welcome, and his audience demanded "plantation" lyrics from him which painted a

sentimental, nostalgic, and largely fictitious account of life for black slaves in the pre-Civil War South or later. Dunbar's reputation has risen since the 1960s with the rediscovery of his many lyric poems outside of the "plantation" vein. But it would take the Harlem Renaissance and Langston Hughes in the 1920s to present American black speech stripped of the dialect stereotypes expected of Dunbar. Other poetic forms that found some favor around the turn of the century were the social protest poems of Edwin Markham, and the "vagabond-style" Romantic wanderer verse of such poets as Bliss Carman and Richard Hovey.

A factor that handicapped the development of American poetry was the vast distances between poets who showed some talent and may have thrived in a center which allowed writers to communicate with one another. London was such a center in England, but the United States saw no movement at the end of the century to resemble the 1890s poets in London who rebelled against the Victorian moralities and the late nineteenth-century version of Romanticism. Outside of the Harvard and New York centers, American poets worked alone, educating themselves on anthologies of English poetry, and finding most publishing outlets wanting verse that conformed to the established conventions expected by their readers. Frustration with the cultural climate of the United States had already by the turn of the century contributed to the exodus to Europe of the painters Whistler and Mary Cassatt, and the writers Henry James and Gertrude Stein – as it would a few years later to the exodus of Pound, H.D., and T. S. Eliot, and in the 1920s to a generation of expatriates, including Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

But there were other developments in nineteenth-century American poetry which produced poets whose work would be recognized in the coming century as major. Although Walt Whitman had published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 and had died in 1892, his achievement was still questioned into the 1940s in some academic circles. As an undergraduate at Columbia University, Allen Ginsberg had found hostility to Whitman's work among the English faculty. Nevertheless, for more radical poets of the 1910s Whitman's work offered a possible direction for American poetry: it sanctioned both free verse and a frankness about physical matters that was alien to the genteel tradition. Even Pound accepted, in his poem "A Pact," that he had "one sap and one root" with Whitman. Another poet whose work became important in the new century was Emily Dickinson, whose poetry began to be published in 1890. Her wit, verbal inventiveness, and ambiguity were a sharp contrast to the hopeful, formal pieties of mainstream verse, while her sophistication was quite different from the academic formality of the Harvard poets. The poetry of Stephen Crane also prefigured some aspects

of the modernist style to come. Although best known for his prose writing, the two volumes of poetry that he published around the turn of the century ridiculed conventional religious piety, condemned the material values of the age, and used a direct, prosaic form of address borrowed from his fiction writing and from journalism.

Two other poets who borrowed techniques from prose writing, and whose work would produce major contributions to American poetry in the first two decades of the new century, were Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost. Both used narrative in their tales of individual characters, community, and hardship, and both initially had trouble finding publishers and an audience. Both developed their styles largely by reading English poets, and separate from urban centers – Robinson in Maine, and Frost in New Hampshire. Robinson finally found success when he moved to New York, and Frost when he moved to England and found a publisher in London willing to print his work. Both writers worked within the subject matter of Romantic poetry – human potential, the relationship of man to nature, man's place in the universe, and the relations between men and women. But theirs is poetry which, like the poetry of Hardy in England, questions the assumptions of Romanticism. In the case of Robinson's work, ideals and hope function as fantasies to allow his characters to escape for a time the realities of their defeated lives. For Robinson much remained unknown about the spiritual condition of mankind, an uncertainty that his poetry dramatized the difficulties of facing.

Frost, in a quieter but more varied way, wrote poetry about the limitations imposed upon the human desire for limitless possibility – limitations imposed by a nature probably indifferent to human wishes, and by the physical and intellectual limits of the human condition, limitations all the more quietly tragic when set against the boundless reach of human imagination. Such poetry set Frost and Robinson against the poetry of genteel spiritual comfort. Once the poetry of Frost and Robinson found an audience in the early decades of the century, they, more than the modernist poets who soon followed, were awarded the literary prizes and embraced by the wider poetry-reading public. The formal qualities of their poetry still appeared, for some readers, to suggest the possibilities of an order, even if it were only Frost's "momentary stay against confusion." But this "stay" became a more contingent order in a poet like Wallace Stevens, whose order was self-consciously a necessary fiction, and even more problematic in poets such as Pound, H.D., and T. S. Eliot, where such possibilities seemed to be located in the past, if at all, and certainly not an immediate past for which a reader might feel the indulgence of a sentimental nostalgia.

# Transatlantic Connections

Pound, writing from England, had urged Williams to acquaint himself with the London writers in order to modernize himself. The letter, and the reading list that accompanied Pound's advice, were part of his tireless attempts to bring news of the London avant-garde to his home country, which he saw as hopelessly provincial. But in the years leading up to the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, in the war years themselves, and in the decade that followed, the United States increasingly became more integrated politically, economically, and artistically into world, and particularly European, concerns. In addition, the growing wealth of the United States helped to produce more publishing outlets for poetry, a greater readership for the volumes produced, a growing university system, an economic environment of opportunity for foreign writers and artists to visit or settle, and the economic means for more and more American writers and artists to travel and live abroad.

The isolation of American poets also began to be mitigated by movements in various urban centers that challenged – or ignored – the New England and New York establishment. These centers fostered cheaply produced or subsidized “little magazines” that published modern writing, and, through an act as simple as sending in a subscription, a writer could read the work and – as was often the case – travel to the city to join the group.

The two most important centers to emerge were in Chicago and a revitalized New York, although there were important movements in New Orleans, San Francisco, and Philadelphia too. In Chicago Carl Sandburg applied what he learned from Whitman to celebrate the commercial activities and ruthlessness at the heart of the city's wealth, bringing a prosaic directness and concreteness into modern poetry. When a writer such as Sherwood Anderson looked for an alternative to the business world of Ohio he looked to Chicago, and, adding to what was quickly becoming a recognizable regional literature, published a volume of somewhat forgettable



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Whitmanesque lyrics, although a few years later he became much better known for his prose volume *Winesburg, Ohio*. Out of the Chicago avant-garde emerged two important “little magazines,” non-commercial, low-paying, limited circulation, and committed to printing modern writing. *Poetry*, the first of these, was started by Harriet Monroe, whose own poetry was not particularly modern. But she published the work not only of the Chicago poets, but of Williams, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and other east coast writers too, and, with Ezra Pound sending in manuscripts from London, she also published Pound, H.D., Yeats, and early poems by T. S. Eliot. *Poetry* appeared regularly every month – and still does; the poets were actually paid for their contributions thanks to a group of wealthy sponsors gathered through Monroe’s social contacts. The magazine also offered a series of prizes annually. *Poetry* retained for a few years a certain stuffiness that finally alienated Pound, and that led Williams to complain that if Monroe continued to print the first letter of each of his lines in upper case against his will he would send in no more poems; but its existence was central in putting poets in touch with one another and in bringing American poetry on to the international scene.

The other magazine to come out of the Chicago Renaissance was a more intermittent, ragged, and radical affair, *The Little Review*, published by Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap. With such journals as *Poetry* and *The Little Review*, Monroe and Anderson redefined the role of the salon hostess that had been satirized in Pound’s poem “Portrait d’une Femme” and took it into the twentieth century. *The Little Review* took more chances than *Poetry*, and Pound eventually shifted his support and contacts to Anderson’s journal. Along with publishing the Chicago writers and modernist poets, Anderson published the early chapters of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as they became ready for print, and thus ran into legal troubles for publishing what the authorities deemed obscene. For one issue subscribers received a magazine consisting almost entirely of blank pages, with a complaint by Anderson that submissions were inadequate for the kind of radical work that she wanted to publish. Like *The Egoist* in London, which at different times boasted H.D. and T. S. Eliot as associate editors, *The Little Review* had a parallel agenda of promoting greater political and moral freedoms for women (denied the vote until 1920 in the US). *The Little Review* followed its editors to New York, and subsequently to Paris, its location almost a barometer of where avant-garde activity was most centered. And its final issue in 1929 also mirrored the end, with the Wall Street crash, of the financial well-being that had allowed such journals to survive.

A thriving avant-garde movement began towards the end of the century’s first decade in New York City, one important focus of which were the

painters and photographers centered around the work of Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz's 291 Gallery brought the work of the Paris impressionists and cubists to New York, and encouraged such American first-generation modernist painters as John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, and Georgia O'Keefe. Writers mixed with visual artists at 291, and also in the salons of wealthy patrons such as Walter Arensberg and Mabel Dodge. Many American modernist poets looked to the radical activity of the painters, sculptors, and photographers for direction rather than to the previous generation of poets. A high-profile culmination of this activity was the 1913 Armory Show, which gathered together in New York the paintings of such artists as Gauguin, Matisse, Cézanne, and Duchamp. So much did this exhibition become in retrospect a foundation event in American modernism that William Carlos Williams convinced himself in a number of interviews years later that he had attended, although his wife was sure that he was recalling a later exhibition.

With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, a number of European painters retreated to New York, supported by such patrons as Arensberg. Thus New York itself became a center for international avant-garde activities. Two of the most important artists to turn up in New York were Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia. Duchamp's "ready-mades," such as his snow shovel and his urinal "sculptures," challenged the authority of viewer-imposed conventions upon the artist's activities, insisting that the qualities of what could be called "art" rested solely on the authority of the artist. Such prefabricated objects also challenged other Romantic assumptions about the relationship of the artist to his or her material, particularly the Romantic foregrounding of originality and emotional expression. Arensberg purchased from Duchamp a photographic reproduction of his painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*. The original had been a sensation of the Armory Show. Duchamp painted over the photograph, had it framed, and it took its place in Arensberg's collection. In addition to the general ethos of creative rebellion produced by such gestures, Duchamp's "ready-mades" – and Picabia's machine-like drawings – promised an industrial-based art particularly suited to the artists of what had become the world's foremost industrial economy. Such iconoclastic gestures signaled the irrelevance of the prestigious European heritage of past achievements, and emphasized instead the primacy of subject matter not connected to historic themes, places, or narratives.

Imagism, developed initially in the pages of *Poetry* and *The Egoist*, and demonstrated in the poetry of Pound and H.D. among others, had a similar appeal to a number of American poets. Its emphasis upon non-traditional rhythms, the primacy of the moment, free verse, and economy of expression also made the legacy of English verse largely irrelevant. The manifestos of imagism invoked modern painting as a parallel. Here was a sanction for

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American poetry to take its own direction, and imagism had much more of an impact upon subsequent American poetry than upon verse in England.

The various art exhibitions that accompanied New York's emergence as an avant-garde center produced their own short-lived little magazines, and there was often room for poetry. One of the most important literary magazines in these years was *Others*, which originated out of the activities of an artists' colony in Grantwood, New Jersey, just across the Hudson from Manhattan, and which was at one point financed by Arensberg. Behind the magazine were such figures as painter and photographer Man Ray, and poets William Carlos Williams and Alfred Kreyborg. The tireless Pound sent over a sheaf of imagist poems for the journal to publish. *Others* set itself up as an alternative and complement to Chicago's *Poetry*. It carried more belligerent manifestos than its Chicago rival, appeared more erratically, and was much less well funded. In its pages appeared early work by Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore.

The end of the war in 1918 left western Europe in a financial quagmire, but the United States at the beginning of an economic boom. The artists and writers who had taken shelter from the war in New York returned to Paris, and they were followed by a new generation of American writers, artists, editors, and hangers-on, who flocked to Paris, where the dollar's buying power against the devalued franc allowed a lifestyle that bought leisure to write, and allowed journals to publish cheaply – with time left to play in a country where moral rectitude had not led to Prohibition as it had in the United States. Journals such as *Broom* and the *transatlantic review* offered opportunities for modernist poets, and Americans Robert McAlmon and William Bird set up publishing houses in France that offered small print runs and quality printing for writers whose work could not find a commercial press. Meanwhile the London poetry scene lost some of its most promising poets in the war, and D. H. Lawrence began travels that took him anywhere but England, looking in his poetry to Whitman as a guide to what poetry could be. Pound moved to Paris, and later to Italy, declaring England to be in the last stages of a fading and corrupt empire.

But the centers of activity for American poetry split rather than shifted. Chicago, where Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg appeared to be repeating themselves, became less important, but in New York an alternative to the international modernism of the prose and poetry writers in Paris asserted itself. Critics such as Van Wyck Brooks and Paul Rosenfeld argued, much as Emerson had done in the previous century, for America to find its own writers and themes. A vibrant economy, an increased interest in new kinds of arts, and progress in promoting racial equality were behind the explosion of talent in the Harlem Renaissance, with such figures as Claude

McKay, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes leading the way. *Others* folded, but Williams began a new magazine titled *Contact* which emphasized, as its title suggests, the need to stay connected to America and American things; but his co-editor McAlmon joined the exodus to Paris. However, a well-financed takeover turned a moribund journal titled *The Dial* into an important New York outlet for modernist work – although the journal was international in its scope. A \$2,000 annual prize indicated the resources of the magazine. The first award went to Sherwood Anderson. The second went to T. S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* had its first US publication in *The Dial*. Eliot had remained in London, and his influence on poetry and criticism on both sides of the Atlantic went on to become immense.

With the success of *The Waste Land*, and with much modern American prose and poetry being written or published in Europe, the provincial isolation of the American poet was over, something even the nativist apologists in New York conceded in their subject matter and styles. Despite the movement in New York, international modernism became the predominant style of modern American writing, the allusions and models coming from the European and Eastern traditions rather than from the legacy of American writing, with the exception of the increasing recognition of the achievement of Whitman. Eliot's style had been developed largely from his reading of nineteenth-century French poetry. Back in New Jersey, Williams ruefully imagined in a prose essay introducing his *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920) an international congress of poets where translations of French medieval poetry would be offered as representative American verse. This period – in which Continental Europe seemed an extension of the American literary scene, publication outlets abounded, and little magazines could be started in Europe for relatively few dollars – came to an end with the Wall Street crash of 1929. By the end of the decade *The Dial*, *Broom*, the *transatlantic review*, and the presses of McAlmon and Bird had all folded.

# Tradition and the Rise of the Universities

The economic troubles of the 1930s gave birth to a number of politically radical magazines whose pages were open to poetry, but which preferred poetry in line with their own political views. “Relevance” became an issue for some editors and critics, and high modernism was viewed with suspicion by some for what were regarded as its insular concerns with questions of form, and its elitist sense of audience. Of prominent poets, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens particularly encountered criticism for writing poetry cut off from current events, although from the perspective of more than 50 years later critics can link their work convincingly to cultural and political events of the decade. When it didn’t refer to a political position, “relevance” often meant writing about a recognizable contemporary world outside of the poem, as well as writing in a more inviting – usually traditional – way.

Two ways in which poetry returned to more traditional concerns that had been marginalized by modernism but that were not necessarily rooted in the contemporary world, and even marked a retreat from it, were in a revival of the poetry of meditation, and an associated claim for the moral duties of poets and poetry. Following *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot’s poetry moved, with *Ash-Wednesday* and later *Four Quartets*, towards a more meditative vein, and following Eliot’s conversion to the Anglican Church in 1927 his poetry became more explicitly concerned with linking moral and spiritual issues, and finding redemption through intellectual, spiritual, and physical discipline. Eliot’s London journal *The Criterion* had an important influence on US as well as British poetry, and his editorial position at publishers Faber & Faber also governed which US poets received that important international distribution. Faber & Faber published the verse of Marianne Moore, for example, the volume carrying an introduction by Eliot.

The second contrast to high modernist concerns also owed a great deal in one of its aspects to the work of Eliot. The 1930s saw the rise of a group of

poets centered in the South, including Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren, who argued for a return to the virtues of a more rural way of life, and a poetry that in its content and craft reflected that order and its disciplined moral focus. The claims for rural virtues were in part a response to the perceived failure of cities, industry, and the complex economic developments that had produced the Depression. These poets were professional educators, associated with English departments, and their views – shaped by Eliot and the work of English critics I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, and William Empson, and later articulated by American Cleanth Brooks along with Warren – became the foundation of the New Criticism that had important influence in English departments well into the second half of the decade. The association of these figures with the academies led to their being on important prize-awarding committees and thus to their being able to confer further prestige on the poetry endorsed by New Criticism – such as the early poems of Robert Lowell.

The more radical modernist writers still kept on writing, although publishing opportunities were fewer and their work often appeared in limited editions. Frost, Stevens, Langston Hughes, and Moore had commercial publishers; H.D.'s work was privately printed, but Pound and Williams had to wait until the end of the 1930s for James Laughlin to found *New Directions* before they found a regular US publisher. At the beginning of the decade objectivism reformulated some of the principles of imagism, and the movement found a publishing outlet when George Oppen started the *Objectivist Press*. The movement advocated precision and a careful attention to the function of language that produced a line of American poetry, including the work of Louis Zukofsky, Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, and Charles Olson, whose achievement is still debated by some literary critics.

Poetry in England in the 1930s became even more politically charged because of events on the Continent. For W. H. Auden, the foremost English poet of the 1930s, the political litmus test finally became too confining. Auden came to the United States at the end of the decade, and became an American citizen in 1946. His poetry remained formal and moral in character, and his US residence arguably did not change his work in significant ways, but he became an ever-present voice on the New York literary scene through his reviews and introductions as well as his verse, and in the 1950s introduced a whole new generation of American poets, including John Ashbery and Adrienne Rich, to the public through his association with the annual volumes of the *Yale Younger Poets* series. Auden's was only one example of the continuing internationalism of American poetry.

New Criticism itself, for all its local agrarian and racial issues connected to the southern United States, was an international movement. T. S. Eliot took

up British citizenship, and in a later generation English poets Thom Gunn and Denise Levertov came to the United States, while American Sylvia Plath lived and wrote in England. Such cases raise complex issues of literary nationality. These issues would be further complicated by the rise of multi-cultural voices in the US as a result of post-war waves of immigration in the last decades of the century, and by the parallel rise of the poetry of ethnicity.

The political disruption in Europe in the 1930s brought European artists to New York for much the same reasons as in 1914, although it was a measure of the international scope of American culture in the 25 years up to 1939 that these visitors had less of a visible impact than the earlier wave. Most prominent of the artistic refugees on the east coast were the surrealists (many prominent French and German film directors went to Hollywood, with mixed fortunes). The surrealist emphasis upon the vocabulary of the subconscious and the unmediated expression of the subconscious in artistic expression received a welcome among avant-garde journals, and appeared to give a renewed boost to the modernist claims that the conventions of form – now dominant again with the rise of New Criticism – were an anachronism. But its foremost legacy was its contribution to abstract expressionism, the first international art movement with American origins, and a movement which itself had an influence upon some important poets in the 1950s. A case can also be made that surrealism contributed to the climate that produced the Confessional poets of the 1950s, and it was certainly an influence upon the Deep Image poets of the 1960s, represented by the work of James Wright and Galway Kinnell. As for the Second World War itself, although it produced no poetry to equal the impact of Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, or James Jones's *From Here to Eternity*, in contrast to the First World War many current and future American poets served in the armed forces and the war figured in some of their verse, or had an impact upon their attitude towards later armed conflict, particularly the Vietnam War.

# Rebellion in the Fifties and Sixties: The Two Anthologies

The formal, crafted style endorsed by the New Criticism continued to shape the poetry of some important poets into the 1950s, including Allen Tate, Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, and Melvin Tolson. The early poetry of John Berryman, Adrienne Rich, and Robert Lowell was also in this style, but they, along with a number of other poets, began to regard it as too constricting and artificial and their later work moved in different directions.

The divisions emerging in American poetry in the 1950s were captured by the appearance towards the end of the decade by two anthologies of current poetry that each offered quite a different emphasis: Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson's *New Poets of England and America* (1957) and Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960). The multiple directions that American poetry took in the 1950s, and the rising student marketplace, made the kind of sorting process offered by an anthology attractive, although each of these volumes had its particular perspective to defend, and simplifications of similarities and differences were inevitable.

The Hall, Simpson, and Pack anthology carried a short introduction by Robert Frost, who had never forsaken the formal qualities of verse. Frost was a household name in the 1950s, and more popular than ever with the general poetry-reading public. The anthology included the work of English and American poets, because, in terms of the style that the anthology represented, the poetry of the two countries was similar. These poets had abandoned the extreme fragmentation and discontinuity of the modernist style, but had retained an emphasis upon economy, wit, impersonality, and craft. English poetry had arrived at a similar point in its reaction against a new Romantic revival (a revival represented, for example, in the poetry of Dylan Thomas). Poets receiving their first anthology appearance in the volume included Robert Bly, John Hollander, Donald Justice, Reed Whittemore, and Adrienne Rich. Also included were James Merrill and Robert Lowell.



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The poets in the Allen anthology, by contrast, had returned to many of the high modernist qualities rejected by the writers in the 1957 collection. The 1950s saw a new interest by some contemporary poets in the work of Williams, Stevens, Pound, and H.D., who were looked to as providing possible alternative models to the qualities of formalist verse, including a more spontaneous speaking voice that in a general way could be traced back to Whitman. This speaking voice was not, as New Criticism insisted, a persona invented by the poet, but was understood to be the poet speaking directly. Such a style, along with an emphasis upon process rather than craft, and an occasional return to myth and archetype, seemed to such contemporary poets more American, more democratic, more contemporary, and less academic.

Allen's anthology divided its new American poets into five categories, and although the division was inevitably reductive and somewhat arbitrary, it provided a useful map of one set of contemporary trends in American poetry and proved very influential in later criticism and histories. In addition, it gave the first national exposure to a number of emerging writers. Allen was assisted in his selection and planning, as he acknowledged, by Charles Olson. Olson was a tireless theorizer of open, organic form, and for a time principal of the radical Black Mountain College. The poets associated with the school and/or its journal, including Olson himself, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Denise Levertov, formed one of Allen's groupings. Olson's essay "Projective Verse" was an important statement of their principles (in a gesture that recognized some of the continuities, William Carlos Williams had quoted from it and discussed it in his 1951 *Autobiography*). Another of Allen's groups was the Beat writers, most notably Allen Ginsberg, whose reading and subsequent publication of "Howl" made him first a local then a national celebrity almost overnight. The San Francisco poets, most of whose work as individuals was not sustained in future years but who represented an important center for contemporary writing that had arisen in the early 1950s, formed another group. Writers associated with New York, including John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, writing verse that was urban, sophisticated, and concerned with the moment, formed another. In a miscellaneous group for which Allen claimed no common characteristic he included LeRoi Jones, later, as Amiri Baraka, to be a central figure in the protest voice of the Black Arts movement.

To varying degrees Allen's poets set themselves against the prevailing political conservatism of the United States in the 1950s, arguing overtly or implicitly for a different set of values to those associated with the suburban, materialistic lifestyle produced by America's post-war wealth, and foregrounded in the growing medium of television and by the popular magazines of the day. The rebellion against the impersonality of the New Critical mode also combined with a rejection of the highly specific gender roles of popular

post-war culture and helped to produce the sexual frankness and open homosexual themes of a poet like Ginsberg. Sexual frankness and the questioning of gender roles would become even more central to the work of the Confessional poets, some of the most important of whom were women. Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath are most associated with the style, and the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and the later work of Adrienne Rich have affinities with it. These poets rejected many of the attitudes associated with the claims of male authority, as well as, in various ways, the conventions of literary decorum and romance. Male poets who adopted characteristics of the style were Robert Lowell, whose *Life Studies* in 1959 marked a major change of direction in his writing, and John Berryman in his *Dream Songs*. As a measure of the shifting allegiances, and the qualifications that need to be attached to categories, Lowell and Rich, as noted above, had appeared in the 1957 formalist anthology, while Berryman had appeared in neither.

In the decades that followed, the personal lyric, and the assertion of identity and political rights against the homogenizing pressures of a dominant Euro-American culture – along with changes in the immigration laws that scrapped quotas favoring northern Europeans – would lead to the beginnings of a rich poetry of cultural and ethnic diversity, including poetry in English by Native American writers. These trends would find full expression in the last two decades of the century.

# The Poetry of Change

One of the most prominent poets of the 1960s, Denise Levertov, was one of the most active politically. Levertov's first volume, published in her native London, had been in the neo-Romantic vein of the time, but upon moving to the United States in the 1950s she turned to the poetry of Williams and Black Mountain College, and later to Stevens and H.D. too, for models. In the 1960s, as the Vietnam War increased in intensity, Levertov's poetry became more overtly political, emphasizing less the nuance and quiet mystical intensity for which it had been admired, and engaging directly the images and consequences of war. For some of her readers and fellow poets this was an inappropriate, even naive, role for poetry. To this charge Levertov, and some of the other poets who wrote and demonstrated against the war, replied that poetry had a duty to address such a vital contemporary issue. One way that Levertov included the war in her poetry was through the "notebook" form of some of her volumes (e.g. *To Stay Alive* [1971]), emphasizing organic process and the contemporary moment. Another poet who wrote of and actively opposed the war, Robert Lowell, published his *Notebook 1967-68* in 1969 and revised it the following year. Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, and Galway Kinnell also wrote against the war, although of course from the point of view of non-combatants hostile to the actions and values of those running the war, and responding to the images carried by the media. The closest such poets could get to the first-hand authority of such First World War British poets as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon was to visit Vietnam, which Levertov and Rukeyser did in 1972. Yusef Komunyakaa, awarded the Bronze Star for his service in the conflict, brought the details of war directly into his poetry in *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), but he has said that he had to wait 14 years before he was able to write poetry about his experiences in Vietnam.

Two other important groups of poets who sought to distance themselves from the actions and authority of the establishment were poets of the Black

Arts movement, and poets associated with the feminist movement. LeRoi Jones was the most prominent voice in black poetry in the 1960s and into the 1970s, changing his name to Amiri Baraka with his conversion to the Black Muslim faith, basing himself first in Harlem and then in the racially troubled city of Newark. His move away in the early 1960s from the racially mixed artistic world of New York's Greenwich Village to these predominantly black urban centers signaled his intent to write for an exclusively black audience. The shift marked his giving up on attempts at integration, at convincing the white majority to share power, wealth, and opportunity, to a focus on raising the political consciousness of his black audience through his writing. Baraka published with black presses, as did Gwendolyn Brooks in Chicago, her poetry chronicling the empty, often short and violent, lives of youth in the decaying black areas of the city, histories otherwise buried in crime reports or rows of statistics. Audre Lorde also wrote of racial injustice, but from a more personal, physical perspective. Into the 1980s, Rita Dove's poetry reached back into recent black history for an act of personal and historical recovery that carried wide social significance. The poetry of Brooks, Lorde, and Dove, and of Baraka after the mid-1970s, when it addressed the possibilities of integration rather than division, insisted that that integration be more than merely well-intentioned laws and idealistic rhetoric. It insisted that the history of past and present America include the specific history and condition of those whom the fine rhetoric could too readily make merely abstract. For these poets, poetry had a role in connecting to and giving voice to community, and in insisting upon that community's place, rights, and needs in the United States of the late twentieth century. Such poetry, as with the anti-war poets, made claims for the continuing relevance of verse, for the role of the poet as community leader, and for the importance of respecting the power of language to serve the truth.

Similar concerns governed feminist poetry, most centrally voiced in the 1980s in the work of Adrienne Rich, following in the tradition of the poetry of H.D., Bishop, Sexton, and Plath. The community addressed here was women denied by male-centered conventions and social mores the opportunity to experience the real power of motherhood, to freely love another woman, and to discover and live by values other than those praised in the conventional rhetoric of politics, economics, history, and romance. More than black poetry after the mid-1970s, poetry that led and responded to the feminist movement retained a tone of anger and a determined self-sufficiency, but without the sometimes explicit violence of the black poetry of the 1960s. The poetry argued that violence was a crime committed against, not by, women.

Another role claimed for poetry in the 1970s and 1980s was not to advocate change but record it. Here the poet was again the seer, seeing what

went otherwise unnoticed, but hesitant to claim that noticing such things brought the power to do more than move with the flow of time and sensation out of which human experience is composed. Such poetry posited the relativity of all moments of lived experience, examined the problems with claiming a perspective that went beyond the experience of such moments, and faced living with the probability that human perspective was inevitably limited. The range of such poetry, articulated within contemporary versions of the meditative tradition and following on in particular from the poetry of Wallace Stevens, W. H. Auden, and the later work of T. S. Eliot, can be seen in the poems of John Ashbery and James Merrill. Ashbery's poetry records the moment-by-moment engagement of consciousness with the outside world and with memory. Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* sought to put the limited human perspective into the context of the wider vision offered by the world of spirits and angels speaking to mortals through the medium of the poet and his poetry. But, whether recording the hesitations of a moment or the descent of an archangel, the poetry emphasized the process of change and the limited ways in which humans could affect its direction. Such poetry did not advocate change, but saw it as the central condition of late twentieth-century existence. In some ways such a view is a particularly American one, coming out of a culture that in important ways defines itself in terms that insist upon constant change.

# A Rich Diversity

In the last 20 years of the century the presence of contemporary poets and poetry in the universities became even more visible, with creative writing programs offering faculty positions for poets, and the development of an extensive poetry-reading circuit. The prevailing style in mainstream poetry journals and graduate creative writing programs was the neo-confessional personal lyric, usually in free verse. Another prominent group of American poets, the new formalists, argued for a return to meter and rhyme as part of what it saw as a return to craft and discipline in writing, and the movement brought some English and American poets together under at least one banner, another being the common interests of poets writing on post-colonial themes.

A more radical group of poets developed around the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*; they saw themselves as the inheritors of a line from high modernism through objectivism, the Black Mountain poets, and poststructuralist critical theory. For the Language poets, the concept of the self was not a coherent basis upon which to center the voice and meaning of a poem, but only an ideological construction, created solely by language, and a construction which should be taken apart and exposed by a poetry that foregrounds its own status as an artefact composed of words. In the poetry of such writers as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Susan Howe, discourse is not rational and linear, but jagged, elliptical, and a reminder always to the reader of the poem's construction, and of the act of the reader in responding to it. Even the Language poets have been assimilated by the academy, the State University at Buffalo being an important center for their writing and teaching.

The most visible development in American poetry by the end of the century was the explosion of writing in English from various ethnic groups, sometimes immigrant writers and sometimes the children of immigrants.

American poetry thus began more fully to represent the country's diverse ethnic and immigrant population. Trends in literary and cultural criticism raised awareness of ethnic literatures and contributed to the increased attention to and support of ethnic writing in the academy – where the prevailing style of the personal lyric was particularly suited to the work of poets writing of their ethnic origins.

In broadening their concept of what “literary study” entails, English departments have re-evaluated what constitutes and constituted “American literature.” Within the different ethnic groups themselves – the most prominent being the Chicano and Chicana writers of Mexican origin in the south-west, and Asian American writing that emerged from the immigration following the Vietnam War and the rise of the South-East Asian economies – there is great diversity, as different poets use different elements from their native traditions. A common theme, however, is a sense of cultural displacement or fragmented identity within the pressures of the dominant culture. This theme is also central to the Native American verse that was also finding its voice more and more by the end of the decade, in the writing of such poets as Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Joy Harjo, and of course displacement had for some decades been a major theme of African American writing.

While many ethnic poets may view the mainstream culture as monolithic, American poetry by the end of the century was anything but. The very trends that contribute to what for many poets is the oppressive power of that culture, including the global reach of its multi-national corporations, technology, rhetoric, and media, have heightened such poets' awareness of the distinctive features of their own origins. The threat of homogenization through what is seen as the imperialist and military ethic of the dominant culture has reopened the debate about poetry and politics, figured in the work of a poet like Carolyn Forché. The result, the assertion by poets of the distinctive features of a particular culture and its accompanying traditions, and the insistence upon what would be lost by its dying, has brought a rich diversity and a powerful set of voices to contemporary American poetry. These voices, along with the others outlined above, sometimes complementing one another and sometimes in opposition, together hold the promise of multiple and fruitful directions for American poetry in the new century.

