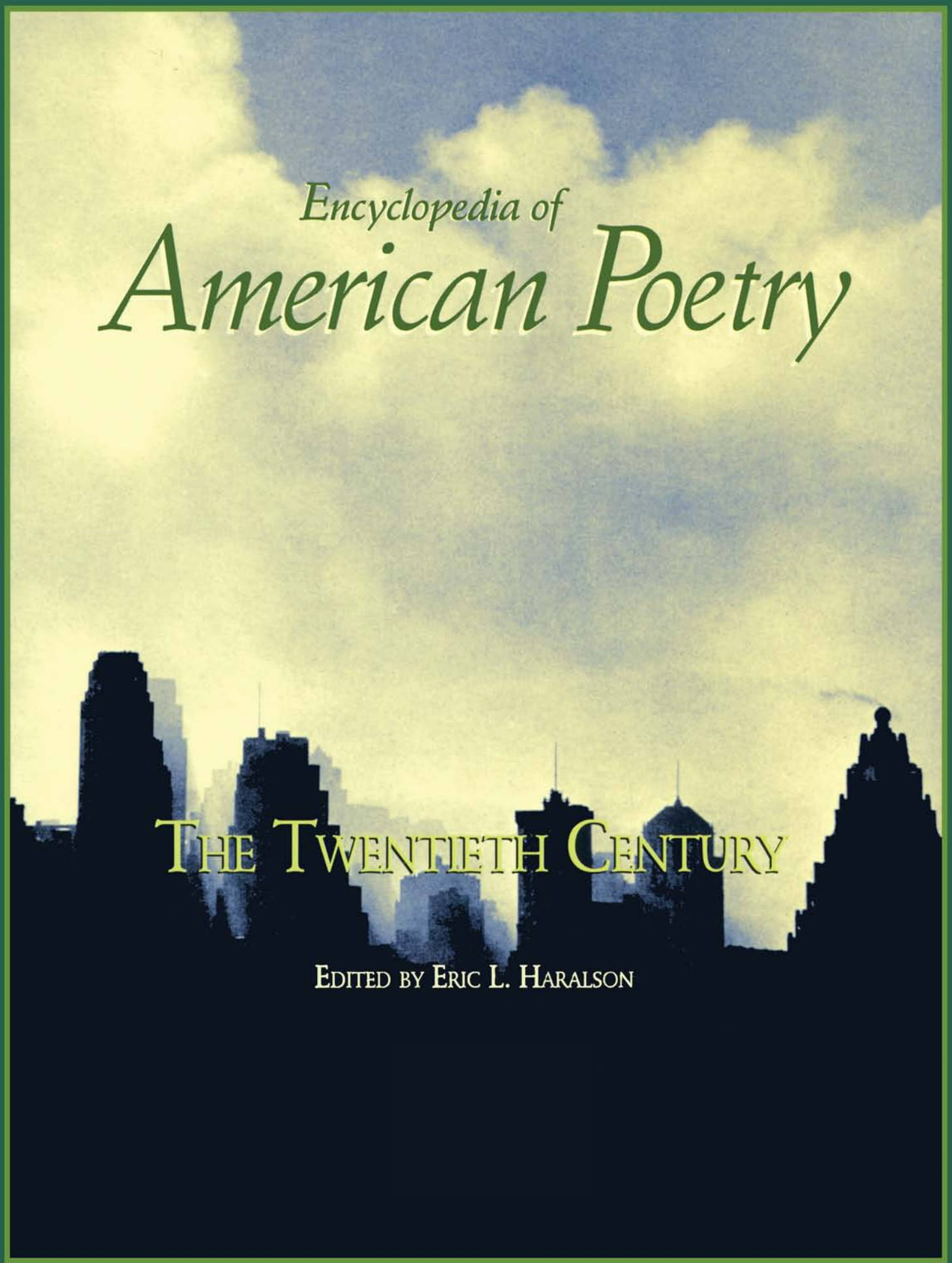
Encyclopedia of
American Poetry
The Twentieth Century
Edited by Eric L. Haralson

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Encyclopedia of American Poetry

The Twentieth Century

Edited by Eric L. Haralson

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In Memory of Jerome Notkin, with love for Janice

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EDITOR'S NOTE

> It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
> It has to face the men of the time and to meet
> The women of the time.
> —Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry"

To hear the poets tell it, poetry is what gets lost in translation. Poetry issues from the continual extinction of the author's personality. It makes nothing happen (although it is a way of happening), and in a certain mood, we are inclined to dismiss it as so much contemptible "fiddle." Nothing that can be said about poetry is worth saying.

By these standards, this project takes on a tall order, for it aspires to find many things worth saying about American poetry of the last century, a period of literary history in which American poetry really came into its own (with all due regard for Dickinson, Whitman, and a handful of their peers). This book indeed seeks to "translate"—or in other words, to explicate with care and tact—a broad selection of poems; it also aims to recover the "personality" and life stories of the women and men who created such an abundant wealth of writing; and it further invites the reader to consider all that poetry has "made happen" both in the way of formal evolution and as a mode of intervention in the complex politics of the so-called American century.

In practical terms, these objectives are served by the following organization of contents:

- Entries on individual **poets** feature a critical treatment of the poet's achievements; a capsule biography; a list of her or his published books of poetry; and, as appropriate, a list of the poet's selected criticism and "other writings" (such as memoirs, correspondence, or translations).
- Entries on landmark **poems** offer close readings of the work thus distinguished and situate it within a historical and biographical context. These entries follow the relevant poet entries, so that five works by Robert Frost, from "Desert Places" to "The Road Not Taken," are addressed immediately after the Frost entry, four works by Adrienne Rich, from *An Atlas of the Difficult World* to "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," are discussed after the Rich entry, and so forth.
- Entries on major **topics** offer in-depth analysis of formal developments in 20th-century American poetry, under such headings as "Free Verse," "Long Poem," and "Prosody and Versification"; of distinct schools or movements, such as "Beat Poetry," "Black Mountain School," "Objectivism," and "Language Poetry"; of poetry engaged in social and cultural politics, such as "Gay and Lesbian Poetry," "Religion and Poetry," and "War and Anti-War Poetry"; of the vibrant verse that has emerged from different ethnic traditions within our national literature, such as "Asian American Poetry," "Harlem Renaissance," "Hispanic Poetry," and "Native American Poetry"; of verse of the Americas with which United States writing has conducted an intimate and intricate dialogue, such as "Canadian Poetry" and "Caribbean Poetry"; and of such crucial aspects of publication and reception as the marketing, teaching, and cultural valuation of poetry, such as "Anthologies, Textbooks, and Canon Formation," "Prizes," "Little Magazines and Small Presses," and "Literary Theory and Poetry."

All entries—poet, poem, or topic—provide a "further reading" list of key secondary sources on the subject of the given entry. Finally, certain poet entries are cross-referenced to topic entries where the poet in question comes in for additional treatment.

To borrow once again from the poets themselves, the goal of this volume is to demonstrate that this extraordinary body of poetry is important not because of any "high-sounding interpretation," but because it has proven useful, in varied ways, to our culture. Throughout, we strive to honor American verse as a source of genuine meanings; as a process of finding, if not always satisfaction, then "what will suffice"; and as a force that can open "chambers of possibility," restore feeling, and revitalize desire. At the end of the day, we are all interested—in the largest sense of the word—in poetry.

My wish, then, for those who consult this book is that reading it will do for you what editing it has done for me: greatly expand and enrich your appreciation of the power, beauty, and profundity of 20th-century American poetry. If this sounds like boasting, it is boasting on behalf of my team of almost 200 contributors, whose expertise and diligent labor will be apparent on every page. Beyond the contributions of these excellent scholars, the project has enjoyed the guidance of an advisory board made up of some of the most distinguished poets and critics (and poet-critics) working in American letters today. Without their insights, this volume would be a diminished thing, and although their names are listed elsewhere, I am pleased to repeat them here in a gesture of recognition for their generous and authoritative counsel: Christopher Beach, Charles Berger, Edward Halsey Foster, Dana Gioia, Elizabeth Gregory, John Hollander, Yusef Komunyakaa, Paul Mariani, Elisa New, Geoffrey O'Brien, Marjorie Perloff, and Linda Wagner-Martin. Without prejudicing the case, I must add that my debt to John Hollander is now ancient, even if he remains young.

My sense of gratitude to Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers almost defies description. George Walsh rescued the precursor volume—the *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*—from publishing oblivion, and his steadfast support is much appreciated. Paul Schellinger has been a model editorial director, firmly and sensitively steering the project through each phase of development. Other valued colleagues at Fitzroy Dearborn who were indispensable to making this big book "go" are Audrey Berns, Anne-Marie Bogdan, Jessica House, Thad King, Elizabeth Nishiura, and Heather Sabel. Gretchen Knapp and Bruce Owens copyedited every line and lineament of the monster, with keen intelligence and unfailing delicacy. Kudos, as well, to Peter Aristedes for selecting an eye-fetching piece of cover art, just as he did for the 19th-century poetry encyclopedia. But my greatest thanks and highest praise are reserved for my commissioning editor, Chris Hudson, who deserves more credit than anybody for making this reference work a reality. Chris is a volume editor's dream—tirelessly dedicated, infinitely wise and helpful, and wonderfully witty when comic relief is called for (as happened once or twice). To my fellow authors in the field I say: you should be so lucky!

It is a pleasure to close with words of thanks and love to those who have been the real poetry in my life—Susan, Sara, and Lucas, Kay and Howie, Janice and Jerry.

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A

Agrarians. *See* Fugitives and Agrarians

Conrad Aiken 1889–1973

As an innovator both in both poetry and prose fiction, Conrad Aiken forecast styles and genres that would later make other poets and writers famous. He waited many years for recognition of his 1920s and 1930s work, which his contemporaries underappreciated. Traumatized as a child when his father shot his mother and then himself—Aiken heard the shots and found their bodies—he said that he "found himself possessed of them forever." Aiken spent the rest of his life writing poetry of psychological exploration, first grounded in Freud and Jung, then moving toward his own hybrid sense of Eastern mysticism in a Western context. Seeking through his deliberately musical poetry the form and order wrenched from him as a child, Aiken plunged into his inner self and attempted to relate that self to the greater world. Critic Malcolm Cowley called him the "priest of consciousness."

After losing his parents, Aiken suffered the second trauma of being separated from his siblings, who were adopted by a family in Philadelphia while he was taken in by a very elderly aunt in New Bedford. Aiken entered Harvard in 1907, befriending T.S. Eliot with whom he shared a mutual interest in poets, poetic theory, language, and their own poems. At Harvard Aiken composed *The Clerk's Journal* (1911), which features similar themes that were employed to greater effect in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (also written in 1911).

In 1912 Aiken married and began his career as a writer. Verse was his first love, but Aiken supported himself by writing reviews, criticism, short stories, and novels. His criticism is now considered prescient, and stories such as "Silent Snow, Secret Snow"—prose versions of his metaphysically introspective inquiries—are much-anthologized classics. His first and second marriages were disrupted by his compulsive affairs, the obsessive quality of which was hardly understood in his time. Guilt pervaded his poetry thereafter.

Most critics—including Aiken himself—dismissed his first published volume of verse, *Earth Triumphant* (1914), as derivative, mainly of John Masefield. *Turns and Movies* (1916) departed from the first volume, depicting the nights of the Vaudeville circuit Aiken loved, where he pursued his illicit liaisons. The blunt, edgy images depict dysfunctional, chaotic relationships. At this time Ezra Pound was promoting Imagism, which called for a new poetic vocabulary to counter fin-de-siècle floridity in favor of a more pruned, viscerally direct language. While Aiken would not claim to be a Pound disciple per se, in 1915 he became a good friend of the poet John Gould Fletcher, a member of the Imagist movement. Fletcher published *Goblins and Pagodas* from the same publisher as *Turns and Movies* in 1916, and the two friends thought of the volumes as companion pieces.

From 1914 until 1930 Aiken lived mainly in England and wrote verse from passion while living off his prose. His audacity was often better understood by his close coterie of friends than by critics. From 1915 to 1920 Aiken composed a sequence of long poems, subtitled "symphonies": *The Jig of Forslin* (1916), *The Charnel Rose* (1918), *Senlin: A Biography* (1918), *The House of Dust* (1920), and *The Pilgrimage of Festus* (1923). He considered them a single long work of musical "movements" meant for one book, but they were published separately, lessening their overall impact. Rhythmically intricate, deft and fluid, the poems used a facile sonority as counterpoint to disturbing images that suggested much more between the lines than in them. Critics of his era praised Aiken's technique but chided him for elevating style over substance, focusing more on the *in* than the *in-between*. The substance of these poems did not become apparent until after World War II, when W.H. Auden's *Age of Anxiety* encouraged more psychological readings of poems. In 1949 the "movements" were finally published together as *The Divine Pilgrim* to greater appreciation.

Aiken's 1929 *Selected Poems* earned the Pulitzer Prize; his future work received more attention. *Preludes for Memnon* (1931) and its sequel, *Time in the Rock: Preludes to Definition* (1936, when he returned to America permanently), are considered his greatest achievement. Fugues rather than symphonies, these poems layer stanzas with superimposed themes reiterated and reinforced in variations rather than repetitions. Aiken forsakes the violent, disturbing aspects of consciousness explored in his earlier work for calmer meditations such as those Eliot would later pursue in his *Four Quartets*.

In 1937 a mellowed Aiken married again and found a bliss that informed his subsequent work, although consciousness remained at the center of works such as *And in the Human Heart* (1940), *Brownstone Eclogues* (1942), and *The Kid* (1947). *Ushant* (1952) is a stream-of-consciousness autobiography that would influence some of the Beat writing of the 1950s. Aiken turned to light verse with *A Seizure of Limericks* (1964) and two books of children's verse: *Cats, Bats and Things with Wings* (1965) and *Tom, Sue and the Clock* (1966). *Thee* (1967) is a Taoist meditation on spirit that never mentions God.

While Aiken's popularity resurged in the 1950s, it later subsided. He was a unique poet who served his art rather than promoted it, an innovator of the introspective perambulations that are integral to so much contemporary poetry.

DAVID GARRETT IZZO

Biography

Born in Savannah, Georgia, 5 August 1889. Attended Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (President, *Harvard Advocate*), 1907–10, 1911–12, A.B. 1912; contributing editor, *The Dial*, 1916–19; American correspondent, *Athenaeum*, London, 1919–25, and London *Mercury*, 1921–22; Instructor, Harvard University, 1927–28; London correspondent, *New Yorker*, 1934–36; fellow, 1947, and consultant in poetry, 1950–52, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Received Pulitzer Prize, 1930; Shelley Memorial Award, 1930; Guggenheim fellowship, 1934; National Book Award, 1954; Bollingen Prize, 1956; Academy of American Poets fellowship, 1957; American Academy Gold Medal, 1958; Huntington Hartford Foundation Award, 1960; Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, 1967; National Medal for Literature, 1969; member, American Academy, 1957. Died in Savannah, Georgia, 17 August 1973.

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Landscape West of Eden, 1934
Time in the Rock: Preludes to Definition, 1936
And in the Human Heart, 1940
Brownstone Eclogues, and Other Poems, 1942
The Soldier, 1944
The Kid, 1947
The Divine Pilgrim, 1949
Skylight One: Fifteen Poems, 1949
Collected Poems, 1953
A Letter from Li Po, and Other Poems, 1955
Sheepfold Hill: Fifteen Poems, 1958
Selected Poems, 1961
The Morning Song of Lord Zero: Poems Old and New, 1963
A Seizure of Limericks, 1964
Preludes, 1966
Thee, 1967
Collected Poems, 1916–1970, 1970
The Clerk's Journal, Being the Diary of a Queer Man: An Undergraduate Poem, Together with a Brief Memoir of Dean LeBaron Russell Briggs, T.S. Eliot, and Harvard, in 1911, 1971
A Little Who's Zoo of Mild Animals (for children), 1977
Selected Poems, 1980

Selected Criticism

A Reviewer's ABC: Collected Criticism of Conrad Aiken from 1916 to the Present, edited by Rufus A. Blanshard, 1958; as *Collected Criticism*, 1968

Other Writings: play, short stories (*Among the Lost People*, 1934), novels (*Blue Voyage*, 1927), an autobiography (*Ushant*, 1952), children's poetry (*Cats, Bats and Things with Wings*, 1965; *Tom, Sue and the Clock*, 1966), correspondence (*Selected Letters*, edited by Joseph Killorin, 1978).

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Spivey, Ted R., *Time's Stop in Savannah: Conrad Aiken's Inner Journey*, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997

Will Alexander 1948–

Will Alexander, a Los Angeles poet of African-American descent, has been prolific (if sometimes partially hidden) since the publication of his first book, *Vertical Rainbow Climber* (1987). His published work (which often includes his own drawings) straddles multiple genre classifications and often seems invested in calling into question the very category of poetry. Most important, because of his fondness for archaic usage, for neologism, and for a sentence (and poetic phrase) style that accumulates rather than sorts—what Harryette Mullen has called a "hyper-hypotactic sentence"—Alexander constantly risks dismissal as being merely willfully obscure. "I'm consumed with trying to find my own language," Alexander has stated, but if the reader is willing to come to terms with both the urgency and the character of that quest, the poet has foregrounded the possibility of a productive (multi)valence, and the quest is thus unlikely to be rejected as narcissism. That impressive escape is, perhaps, a result of his willingness to talk of (if nothing else) biological and aesthetic genealogies and their interesting convergence.

Never to be mistaken as an ideologue, Alexander has described his creative output as marked by a peculiar doubleness, rooted in the differing approaches to life he saw embodied by his parents. His father he describes as "steady" and about locality, home, and power in this world; his mother, however, is about magic, intuition, transcendence, and clairvoyance. This dual inheritance and gift provides the poet with a singular means to approach the "primeval," which, in Alexander's poetics (and criticism), is the eternal shared past. This is not strictly an archaeological or a political conception of "past" but rather an attempt to get back to a paradoxically unreachable genesis moment of human consciousness. Like other counter-Enlightenment figures, Alexander is convinced that present change is dependent on fundamental encounter with the mediation of language, a coming to terms with what is permanently lost.

Alexander's most accomplished work of poetry, *Asia and Haiti* (1995), is organized around an unusual dialogue between the world situations of late-20th-century Tibetan Buddhists (conquered by the Chinese communists) and the endlessly contested Caribbean black republic. While by no means "history poems" per se, the two long compositions that make up the dialogue alternately rely on discernible narratives of liberation and enslavement and the jarring dissonance created by the surprising juxtaposition of the title locations. They are noteworthy for their command of geography, history, and cosmology and, coincidentally, a casual disregard for comprehensiveness, objectivity, and interpretation as measured response. While a student of the poems could certainly become knowledgeable about the geographic places, their incomplete or staggered presentation is intended to invite or establish not "mastery" but some alternative consciousness. A similarly conspicuous and adept admixture of palpability and fabrication (if not hallucination) can be found in an important early prose poem, "Mountain Slope Swimming in Detroit" (1987). Affiliating impossible physical action with a rich panorama of city landmarks, milestones, and ephemera, somehow the poem productively rants against urban disrepair and hate while never swaying from its surrealist commitment into didactic explication. History and myth are not so much exacting and alternating terms here as they are an interestingly protean dyad; one becomes the other, partaking of its mental currency and offering reassurance toward its inevitable incompleteness.

A further doubleness in Alexander's creativity might be marked by the ways in which it is appropriate to simultaneously locate him inside and outside typical delineations of African-American poetry. He has pointed out the importance of the African-American surrealist poet Bob Kaufman to his development but has also claimed Arthur Rimbaud as the poet who clarified his own calling to write. (See his important essay "Bob Kaufman: The Footnotes Exploded," in *Conjunctions* 29 [1997].) Since Alexander's poetry has little truck with African-American vernacular, is distant from specific confrontation with the peculiarities of American race relations, and is hard to place relative to the influence of the preeminent African-American Modernists (Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, or Langston Hughes), it is unlikely that his work will be readily canonized within any consensus academic accounting of African-American poetics. Still, his reliance on "found language" is reminiscent of some accounts of black aesthetics in which improvisatory virtuosity is seen as definitive of black difference or singularity; moreover, his continued valorization of Kaufman itself points out how accounts of black poetic achievement continue to be circumscribed by narrowed expectations. In general, Alexander, like African-American poets Nathaniel Mackey, Harryette Mullen, and Ed Roberson, has found that it is wholly possible to effectively exist at the crossroads of American experimental poetries and post-1960 African-American avant-gardism. Multiplicity in influence (and perhaps even agenda) prevents neither psychic clarity nor specific kinds of allegiance. However, noting as further influences Aimé Césaire, Federico García Lorca, Octavio Paz, and Antonin Artaud and as further contemporary conversation partners Clayton Eshleman, Fanny Howe, Philip Lamantia, and Leslie Scalapino, Alexander incessantly describes and builds an anti-provincial intellectuality and commitment to the dismissal of conventional artistic categories.

Unfortunately, Alexander's work has yet to receive the kinds of sustained attention necessary to unpacking his valorization of the "arcane." Part of this is likely a result of his intimidating array of sources (see, for instance, the essay "Isolation and Gold," in *Towards the Primeval Lightning Field* [1998]), but part, too, may be a suspicion on the part of critics that a traditional exegesis will not serve to reveal the tangible pleasures of Alexander's poetry, relying as it does on a sustained unhinging of "tradition," "exegesis," and so on. This, however, is too pessimistic an assessment. As Alexander has said, "The work finds an audience," by which he might mean not only that his books will be conventionally distributed but also that some process is already at work by which his poetry's strangeness will produce both wonder and understanding.

JAMES C. HALL

Biography

Born 27 July 1948 in Los Angeles, California. Attended University of California-Los Angeles, B.A. 1972; since 1996 has taught at University of California-San Diego, New College, San Francisco, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York, and State University of New York at Buffalo. Received Whiting grant, 2000–01. Living in Los Angeles.

Poetry
Vertical Rainbow Climber, 1987
Arcane Lavender Morals, 1994
Asia and Haiti, 1995
The Stratospheric Canticles, 1995
Above the Human Nerve Domain, 1998
Towards the Primeval Lightning Field, 1998

Other Writings: novels (*Pandora's Hatchery,* 1994), novella (*Alien Weaving,* 2001), plays (*Conduction in the Catacombs,* 1997), and essays (*Singing in the Magnetic Hoofbeat,* 2002).

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Mullen, Harryette, "'Hauling Up Gold from the Abyss': An Interview with Will Alexander," *Callaloo* 22, no. 2 (1999)

Miguel Algarín 1941–

Miguel Algarín has nurtured "Nuyorican" (New York Puerto Rican) poetry and theater in the Lower East Side of Manhattan for almost three decades. Founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café, Algarín is one of the most important promoters of performance poetry in the contemporary United States. He arrived in New York City in the summer of 1951, when he was nine years old. Although he had experienced some degree of racism from fairer-skinned islanders as a child in his native Puerto Rico, the race tensions of mid-20th-century New York City certainly affected his life greatly. Despite their hardscrabble existence in neighborhoods fraught with poverty, drug use, and violence, Algarín's parents infused his youth with a love of culture. He subsequently earned his undergraduate and master's degrees, and pursued doctoral work in comparative literature in subjects ranging from Shakespeare to Pablo Neruda. Algarín ultimately refused to officially complete his doctorate at Rutgers University, objecting to the "intelligentsia industry" that he felt doctoral programs had become. Instead he published his thesis, a translation of Neruda's *Song of Protest,* with William Morrow in 1976. Ironically, despite Algarín's refusal to formally complete his doctoral degree at Rutgers, the university not only hired Algarín as a professor in its English department but also awarded him tenure.

Algarín's introduction to Neruda's *Song of Protest* explains not only the importance of Neruda's book to Puerto Ricans who want to understand their own history through anti-imperialist eyes, but also many of Algarín's motivations in writing his own poetry. "History," writes Algarín, "is personalized. It is attached to the individual. History, made concrete and contemporary, nourishes the memory of the individual and of the whole nation." First and foremost Miguel Algarín's poetry aims to nourish the Nuyorican community of "Loisaida" (the Nuyorican renaming of Manhattan's Lower East Side). It also invites a larger audience to read against the grain of histories that have sorted people of different nations and colors in awkward sociopolitical configurations, arrangements that often obscure the common experiences shared by all people.

Algarín's poetry often returns to what he calls "the zero-point place": home, or that place where one feels a sense of belonging. His readers should prepare themselves for the multi-lingualism native to his own, distinctively Nuyorican, zero-point place. Rather than a strict bilingualism, in which English and Spanish alternate in discrete strophes on the page, multi-lingualism embraces a hybrid, jostling "Spanglish," a linguistic synthesis of the two languages. Just as the Nuyoricans figured prominently in Algarín's poetry find themselves in a "neither/nor" relationship with the larger United States and Puerto Rico ("neither" accepted as part of the mainstream" U.S. "nor" as "authentic" Puerto Ricans), Algarín's poetry straddles a divide between North American and Caribbean poetic traditions. As Algarín wrote in his 1975 introduction to *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (the first published anthology of Nuyorican poetry, which he co-edited with poet Miguel Piñero):

> Everything is in English in the U.S.A., yet there is also a lot of Spanish, and Spanish is now gaining. The mixture of both languages grows. The interchange between both yields new verbal possibilities, new images to deal with the stresses of living on tar and cement. There is at the edge of every empire a linguistic explosion that results from the many multilingual tribes that collect around wealth and power.

The multi-lingual tribe of the Nuyoricans featured so prominently in Algarín's poetry, in fact, may be even more important to the poet than the language and politics of Loisaida. When Algarín tackles large sociopolitical portraits, he grounds his views in his own interpersonal relationships. If he worries about the AIDS epidemic, as in his popular poem "HIV," he worries about the way the disease "contaminates" the sexual expressions between people in love. When he talks about the globalization of Nuyorican aesthetics via multimedia technology in "Nuyorican Angel of Wordsmithing," his goal in using "MTV Unplugged" to "reach millions" across the world is to "interact *live,*" to demonstrate "how a verse can heal human pain." In this way Algarín shows his readers how global forces so often come down to local, human passions: love, hate, anger, lust, longing, and sadness. Even when he takes his readers on a fantastic journey into the cybernetic future of *Body Bee Calling from the 21st Century* (1982), where some would speculate that computers and bionics may have reduced human contact, Algarín posits a world redeemed by "embracing [the] certain sweetness" of lovemaking's inefficiencies. As Efraín Barradas notes in the introduction to *Body Bee,* this commitment to the flow of life implicit in such human contact lies in

the tradition of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." In this vision of America the burgeoning democratic spirit must necessarily be characterized not just by diversity and industry but also by the sexuality of the masses.

Just as Whitman characterizes his bardic poetry as a "song," so Algarín sings his poems—literally. For Algarín the poem lives only partially on the page. Each time he performs one of his poems, it comes alive in a combination of speech and song, sometimes rich and resonant, sometimes keening and pained. By varying the performance of his poems Algarín reaffirms the alternating voice that his aesthetic privileges and also nods to the oral tradition in Caribbean poetry, which shares rhythmic roots with the lively beats of *salsa, merengue, bomba, mambo,* and other lively musical genres of Caribbean origin.

Algarín's role as a poet and editor certainly energizes much of what has come to be known as Nuyorican literature. He incorporates into that tradition not only an awareness of the Lower East Side neighborhoods that Nuyoricans call home but also a sense of how a Nuyorican presence in New York City corresponds to a stake in the future of a multicultural American literary tradition.

TRENTON HICKMAN

Biography

Born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, 11 September 1941. Attended University of Wisconsin, Madison, B.A. 1963; Pennsylvania State University, Philadelphia, M.A. 1965; Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. Lecturer, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, New York, 1965–67; Instructor, Middlesex County College, Edison, New Jersey, 1968; Assistant Professor, then Associate Professor, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, from 1971; editor of Nuyorican Press; director of El Puerto Rican Playwrights'/Actors' Workshop, 1974; executive director of Nuyorican Theater Festival; founder of Nuyorican Poets Cafe, 1975; visiting poet, Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado, 1978. Received Samuel Rubin Foundation grant, 1975; Peabody Foundation grant; New York State Council of the Arts grant. Living in New York City.

Poetry

Mongo Affair, 1978
On Call, 1980
Body Bee Calling from the 21st Century, 1982
Time's Now/Ya Es Tiempo, 1986
Love Is Hard Work; Memorias de Loisaida, 1997

Other Writings: plays (*The Murder of Pito,* 1976), translation of Spanish poetry (*Song of Protest,* by Pablo Neruda, 1976), television programs (*Side Show, the Making of a Play,* 1975); edited collections of poetry (*Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* [co-edited with Miguel Piñero], 1975).

Further Reading

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Hernández, Carmen Dolores, *Puerto Rican Voices in English,* London: Praeger, 1997 (contains an interview with Algarín)
Phillips, J.J., et al., editors, *The Before Columbus Foundation Poetry Anthology: Selections from the American Book Awards, 1980–1990,* New York: Norton, 1992

Julia Alvarez 1950–

One of the most important Latina poets to emerge in the final decades of the century, Julia Alvarez writes poetry that straddles the cultural and linguistic borders between an early life in the Dominican Republic and a subsequent upbringing in the United States. Alvarez identifies herself as "Dominican, hyphen, American," anxious to reject the either/or fallacy that she feels both the dominant Anglo-American culture and the Latino minority cultures of the United States wish to foist upon her. Instead she insists on the importance of essential ties to what she calls a past "torn" and "broken" by competing languages, fraught gender roles, and disparate social realities.

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City to Dominican parents who returned to the Dominican Republic shortly after her birth. Alvarez, whose well-educated parents belonged to landed families of means, enjoyed a life of relative ease during her early years in the Caribbean. This idyllic life of privilege abruptly ended when her father, who had involved himself with resistance groups committed to the overthrow of then-dictator Rafael Trujillo, was forced suddenly to flee his homeland with his family to avoid imprisonment, torture, and likely execution at the hands of Trujillo's secret police. Alvarez and her family suddenly plunged into an economically less-privileged life in Queens, New York, where she and her sisters did not speak the language and no longer occupied a prominent standing in the community. In the autobiographical paragraph Alvarez has published on her Middlebury College website, she refers to this sudden entry into New York life as "land[ing]" in "English." In the United States, Alvarez's Spanish would gradually yield to a "Spanglish" increasingly colonized by English.

For Alvarez, arriving in the United States meant arriving in a land of books. By her own account she hardly read literature of her own volition while in the Dominican Republic; in New York, she read every chance she could get. By the time she entered her teenage years, she knew that she wanted to be a writer. Upon winning several student writing competitions, she gained even more resolve to pursue her chosen career. During the late 1970s

she worked as a poet in public schools in Kentucky, Delaware, and North Carolina and in 1978 received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to create a bilingual program. In 1979 she was awarded the John Atherton Scholarship in Poetry by the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

The publication of her first book of poems, *Homecoming* (1984), preceded what would be her first serious experimentation with the genres of the short story and the novel, although Alvarez makes it clear in one autobiographical statement that she "never abandoned poetry." Indeed, poetry won her a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1987. After publishing two successful novels, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), Alvarez published a second book of poems, *The Other Side/El Otro Lado* (1995). In 1996 she reissued an expanded version of her first book of poems, *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems. Something to Declare* (1998) collects two dozen of her personal essays, many of which speak to her "hyphenated" existence as a Dominican-American writer in the United States.

Homecoming details the scores of domestic duties that a traditional mother inculcates in her daughter: bed-making, dusting, sewing, mending, cleaning, hanging the wash, and so on. Despite the narrator's resistance to these lessons and to the gender inequities she perceives in them, Alvarez finally likens her writing to these "arts" of "woman's work" taught to her in her youth. *Homecoming* also explores the unrealistic romantic expectations promoted in popular women's magazines and fairy tales. Ultimately the poems conclude that it is better to be one of the "unstoried women who [form] the mere backdrop" to the "beauty" and "betrayals" of pop-culture "heroines" than it is to lead a life aboard the "jailhouse train" of unfulfilled expectations. The most significant group of poems in *Homecoming,* the ambitious sonnet sequence "33," contains a sonnet for each of the poet's 33 years (the reissue of *Homecoming* in 1996 contains 46 sonnets). After first asking what it means to be a single Dominican-American woman approaching middle age, the sonnets finally make a larger gesture toward all aging readers of the poems:

> Those of you lost and yearning to be free,
> who hear these words, take heart from me.
> I once was in as many drafts as you.
> But briefly, essentially, here I am.
> Who touches this poem touches a woman.

The Other Side/El Otro Lado delves deeper into the cultural rift where Alvarez makes her home as a writer, featuring an increased interspersion of Spanish words in the English poems and a more careful questioning of what it means to be "bilingual" and "bicultural." These later poems also explore issues of desire and sexuality as important components in the making of herself as a writer. "Bookmaking," a poem selected by Mark Strand for inclusion in *The Best American Poetry 1991,* links her love of books to her love of the human body, intertwining insights Alvarez gleans from a visit to the book displays at New York City's Pierpont Morgan Library with accounts of her love affair with a bookmaker. "Now the words become flesh," Alvarez writes, blending eroticism and bibliophilia until sexuality and textuality become difficult to distinguish:

> the seam of the spine
> centered in the jacket of the shoulders,
> the ligaments tooled in the plates
> of the clavicles, the legible bones
> of the wrists and the ankles.

The poetry of Julia Alvarez advances a prominent Latina voice in the final two decades of the 20th century, framing broad issues of knowing one's own identity by scrutinizing her own identities as a woman, a Latina, and a poet. While the most important poetic accomplishments of her career may well occur in the 21st century, her contribution has already been substantial and impressive.

TRENTON HICKMAN

Biography

Born in New York City, 27 March 1950. Attended Connecticut College, New London, 1967–69; Middlebury College, Vermont, B.A. 1971; Syracuse University, New York, M.F.A. 1975; Bread Loaf School of English, Ripton, Vermont, 1979–80; poet-in-the-schools, Kentucky, Delaware, North Carolina, 1975–78; Instructor, Phillips Andover Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, 1979–81; Visiting Assistant Professor, University of Vermont, Burlington, 1981–83; visiting writer, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., 1984–85; Assistant Professor, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1985–88; since 1988 Associate Professor, Middlebury College, Vermont. Received Academy of American Poetry Prize, 1974; Syracuse University fellowship, 1974–75; La Reina Press Award, 1982; Bread Loaf Writers' Conference fellowship, 1986; General Electric Foundation Award, 1986; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1987–88; Ingram Merrill Foundation grant, 1990. Living in Middlebury, Vermont.

Poetry

Homecoming, 1984; revised edition, as *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems,* 1996
The Other Side/El Otro Lado, 1995

Other Writings: novels (*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,* 1991; *In the Time of the Butterflies,* 1994), children's literature (*The Secret Footprints,* 2000), essays (*Something to Declare,* 1998); edited anthologies of poetry (*Old Age Ain't for Sissies,* 1979).

Further Reading

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American Indian Poetry. *See* Native American Poetry

A.R. Ammons 1926–2001

Despite being one of the great American poets of the 20th century, A.R. Ammons irascibly refused to adhere to the labels set upon him by critics. His work has never been easy to categorize, and his career was marked by sudden turns that seem intended to confuse the issue of what kind of poet he is. For many, he remains the prototypical American Romantic: *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* in 1996 called him the "foremost living representative of the American Romantic tradition in poetry." His Romanticism was always rather skeptical, however, and his views of nature too dependent on humankind's frail and fumbling interactions with it for him to be seen as purely Romantic.

Nevertheless, Ammons is still often called a nature poet, although others see him as a scientific one; he is an Old Testament prophet or a gross hedonist; self-reflective or all encompassing; obsessed with cataclysmic events or quotidian ones; smitten with beauty or obsessed with trash; a master of short, observational lyrics that define moments, or of long, contemplative poems that seek the grandest themes and subjects as represented in a single, all-encompassing image. Too playful for some, too serious for others; too obscure or too simple. In short, he typifies Whitman's famous self-proclamation: "I contain multitudes."

A prodigious writer, Ammons published nearly 30 books in the last 35 years of the 20th century. His influences were the Bible, Robert Browning, Whitman, Lao-Tse, and William Carlos Williams. Although critics often cite Emerson as an influence, Ammons admitted that he did not read Emerson much until Harold Bloom suggested an Emersonian influence. His dominant influences were more experiential than literary: his farm childhood, his family, and his interest in science.

Stylistically, Ammons remained iconoclastic. In the process he also confounded more than a few critics, for he appeared, at least on the surface, to eschew the critics and what they said. He seemed at times more an anti-poet than one anxious for acceptance, sometimes making fun of both critic and poet at the same time, and often managing to downplay the importance of both. Ammons moved back and forth between the lyric and the long poem as easily as he moved from the narrative to the observational to the meditation. He unabashedly employed the spontaneous poetics for which Jack Kerouac was so roundly chastised by critics of a previous generation. Like Cummings, he rarely used capitalization and often laughed at the many interpretations generated by his idiosyncratic use of the colon, his punctuation mark of choice. He also maintained a consistent and engaging interest in how poems are structured, and in the relationship between shape and structure in the physical world and in the poem itself. To that end, much of Ammons' poetic concern is for the dichotomy between the individual and the many, the self and others, the poem and the world. He finds metaphors to explore that dichotomy all about him. Poems are everywhere in the world, he said, if one can but find them. Form in the world echoes form in the poem, but "The writings about the stone do not replace the stone. Nothing can replace the stone." Of poetry itself, he said, "Nothing that can be said about it in words is worth saying." Many of his poems are self-reflective discussions of his methods of composition, sometimes imitating the flow of thought itself. For Ammons, poetry about writing poetry is also poetry about being alive in the world.

Over the course of his long career, Ammons also switched thematic gears at will. At his best he bridges seemingly impossible gaps. Nature and science go as much hand-in-hand in Ammons' poetic world as do the cataclysmic and quotidian. He demonstrates, sometimes going to great lengths, that one cannot appreciate beauty without understanding trash, that great moments mean nothing without the mundane that surrounds them. In fact, his poems often seek to define the moment when beauty starts to turn, inexorably, into something else. Despite humanity's desire for the concretely knowable, "concretion is a myth," he said. "Look into any so-called 'solid object' and it breaks down into this, that and the other until finally there may be nothing going on there but motion" ("From the Wind to the Earth: An Interview with A.R. Ammons," in Schneider, 1999). For Ammons, poems are motion, process.

Whether because he lived most of his life in New York or because so few, relatively speaking, of his poems reclaim the landscapes of his youth, Ammons avoided for most of his career being labeled a "Southern" writer. In his poems he never strayed very far from the farm he grew up on, however, in the swampy lowlands of North Carolina. In fact, had not the Depression forced his father to sell the family farm, Ammons believed that he himself would have spent his life as a farmer. The impact of the Depression on his childhood never left him, despite how far in years and miles he traveled. He often wrote about the indelible imprint those years made upon him and his poetic sensibilities:

> I love the land and the terrible dependency on the weather and the rain and the wind. It betrays many a farmer, but makes the interests of the farmer's life tie in very immediately with everything that's going wrong meteorologically. . . . That's where I got my closeness and attention to the soil, weeds, plants, insects, and trees. ("An Interview," in Ammons, 1996)

In addition to occasional narratives about Carolina roots, his poems often reflect his fine eye and ear for the small moments afforded by daily existence, his ongoing interest in land and landscapes, weather, cycles, and, particularly, his concern with

boundaries. An image from his U.S. Navy experience—he joined near the end of World War II—indelibly marks most of his poetry. From the bow of his ship, the *U.S.S. Gunason,* he had been observing an island on the distant horizon, when he realized that

> the water level was not what it was because of a single command by a higher power but because of an average result of a host of actions—runoffs, wind currents, melting glaciers. ("The *Paris Review* Interview," in Ammons, 1996)

Because of this "interior illumination," he began to "apprehend things in the dynamics of themselves." The "line" where land meets ocean, he realizes, would reveal itself on closer inspection to be rising and falling with the tides: the line is fluid and alive, not fixed.

Although he had been writing since high school, it was not until his stint in the Navy that Ammons found time and inclination to seriously pursue poetry. Despite some early encouragement, it would be another decade, however, before his first poems would start finding their way into print. In the meantime, he returned to North Carolina to study biology, botany, and chemistry at Wake Forest College. He spent a year after graduation as a school principal, started but did not complete graduate work at the University of California at Berkeley, and then settled in southern New Jersey, where he began what he believed would be his career as an executive at a glass manufacturer operated by his father-in-law.

Ammons' first collection, *Ommateum,* was self-published in 1955; it sold 16 copies in five years. Still, he continued to write: "I spent twenty years writing on my own without any recognition" ("The *Paris Review* Interview"). Things began turning for him quickly in July 1963, when he gave a now-famous reading at Cornell University and was subsequently asked why he did not teach. "Why don't you ask me?" he replied. He joined the faculty in 1964.

At Cornell Ammons quickly began to see the results of his years of work in obscurity. *Expressions of Sea Level* (1964) was followed by *Corsons Inlet* and *Tape for the Turn of the Year,* both published in 1965, *Northfield Poems* (1966), and *Selected Poems* (1968). *Tape* was his first dramatic experiment in form, composed on an adding machine tape and concluded when the tape ran out. By 1975 he had published 11 volumes of poetry, including his *Collected Poems, 1951–1971* (1972), which received the National Book Award, and the long poem *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (1974), which was awarded the Bollingen Prize. By this point Ammons' critical reputation had been established, primarily by Harold Bloom's astute criticism and his insistence that Ammons was "a major visionary . . . the Poet that Emerson prophesied as necessary for America" (1986).

The Snow Poems (1977) marked a turn both in Ammons' poetry and in its reception. It was critically panned by virtually everyone except for William Harmon and Helen Vendler. Ammons' own comments on the book make it seem more an anti-poem, something composed to fly in the face of both contemporary poetry and its critics, than an attempt to please his readers:

> I had meant to write a book of a thousand pages . . . because I wanted to say here is a thousand pages of trash that nevertheless indicates that every image and every event on the planet and everywhere else is significant and could be great poetry, sometimes is in passages and lines. But I stopped at three hundred pages. I had worn myself and everybody else out. ("An Interview")

The Snow Poems typifies his belief that "poems are not written in order to be studied or discussed but to be encountered."

Soon after, Ammons returned to more lyrical and accessible work, winning the National Book Critics Circle Award for *A Coast of Trees* (1981) and publishing two other slim volumes of lyrics within the next two years. It was not until *Garbage* (1993), however, that his critical reputation seemed fully restored. It earned for him another National Book Award and has been lauded as "a brilliant book," "a dazzling dance of purposes and speculations, made of whatever material it finds at hand." *Garbage,* like most of his long poems, began with a single image, a notion of the garbage heap as the central metaphor for contemporary American society. In this important work Ammons contemplates what it means to be disposable, and how it feels to be living in a world increasingly filled with waste in all its various forms.

Ammons had a massive coronary in 1989, and in 1998 he suffered a hematoma followed by brain seizures and had to have emergency surgery. His poetic output remained prodigious: *Brink Road* (1996) and *Glare* (1997) continue his explorations of the long poem, spontaneous composition, and many of his thematic interests such as garbage and the peripheries of things. In addition to the prizes given to his individual books, Ammons was also awarded the Frost Medal, a MacArthur fellowship, and the Academy of American Poets' prestigious Tanning Prize, at $100,000 the largest literary prize in the United States.

Since he was first noticed in the mid-1960s, critical response to Ammons' poems has generally been favorable if not laudatory, except for the period surrounding *The Snow Poems.* Bloom and Vendler dominated early discussions of his work, but Steven Schneider has led a shift in recent years that recognizes Ammons as a poet with an ecological conscience grounded in the scientific. For Ammons the simplest walk was fraught with heightened meaning. He found adventure in the smallest places, such as a few drops of water in a seashell, or collected on a leaf where a wasp drinks thirstily. He found high drama in a blue jay eating a cicada, aesthetic wonder and abject horror in garbage mounds, poetry in the silence of pauses. He fashioned in the process a truly American and individualized body of work that will stand as a monument to the 20th century.

ALEX ALBRIGHT

Biography

Born in Whiteville, North Carolina, 18 February 1926. Attended Wake Forest College, North Carolina, B.S. 1949; University of California, Berkeley, 1950–52; served in the United States Naval Reserve, 1944–46; principal, Hatteras Elementary School, North Carolina, 1949–50; executive vice-president, Friedrich and Dimmock, Inc., Millville, New Jersey, 1952–62; Assistant Professor, 1964–68, Associate Professor, 1969–71, from 1971 Professor of English, and from 1973 Goldwin Smith Professor of Poetry, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; Visiting Professor, Wake Forest University, 1974–75; poetry editor, *Nation,* 1963. Received Bread Loaf Writers Conference scholarship, 1961; Guggenheim fellowship, 1966; American Academy traveling fellowship, 1967, and award,

1977; Levinson Prize (*Poetry*, Chicago), 1970; honorary Litt.D., Wake Forest University, 1972, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1973; National Book Award, 1973, 1993; Bollingen Prize, 1974; MacArthur fellowship, 1981; National Book Critics Circle Award, 1982; Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1982; Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt Poetry Prize, 1994; Frost Medal, 1994; Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, 1995; Tanning Prize, 1998. Died in Ithaca, New York, 25 February 2001.

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Easter Morning

In his essay "A Poem Is a Walk," A.R. Ammons claims that "the purpose of a poem is to go past telling, to be recognized by burning." His poem "Easter Morning" moves the reader to that "fresh . . . particular" of insight, to the "unstructured sources of our beings" (*Set in Motion*, 1996). Even as he seeks to return the reader to something beyond language, Ammons identifies nonverbal feelings as the motivation behind his verbal expression in poetry. He claims that his poems come from and are "a way of releasing anxiety," revealing that one such source of anxiety has been the death of Elbert, his 18-month-old younger brother. Although the death occurred when Ammons was four, he says, "I still carry images of that whole thing." In a video recording of "Easter Morning," he explains that the poem, written in Ithaca, New York, just after the death of his wife's father in 1978, also recalls his childhood home of New Hope, North Carolina. The poem was "not worked up, it's just written out." He continues, "I just sat down and wrote the poem . . . basically just the way it is . . . under the pressure of feeling for my own family and for Phyllis' family." Admitting the intense grief that the poem exposes, he adds, "It touched me; I cried for most of the writing of it."

Since its first publication in *Poetry* (April 1979) and its central position in *A Coast of Trees* (1981), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, "Easter Morning" has been viewed as one of Ammons' best and most characteristic poems as well as one of the great lyrics in English. Readers of 17th-century English poetry will hear its echoes and revisions of George Herbert's concrete poem "Easter Wings." Ammons' poem, unlike Herbert's, is divided into six sections of unequal length and forms one long, unfolding meditation, more of a walk than a bird. It dwells on paradox, on "blessings and / horrors," and, as the poet says, on "what the loss of life and the gaining of life can mean." The title's homophonic play on "morning/mourning" suggests just such verbal as well as emotional indeterminacy; in the morning moves the mourning.

Here stalks an ancient grief, such as one finds in the Anglo-Saxon elegies "The Wanderer" or "The Seafarer," where the *ubi sunt* lament of the lone speaker cries out for meaning in a broken life, the ruined world he inhabits. The same human longings motivate the lyric "I" of "Easter Morning" who speaks in the present about the past he always bears. The poem's complex verb-tense shifts demonstrate that the past's losses continue to haunt the speaker's present. "I have a life that did not become," begins the speaker, showing that the present ("have") contains a past ("did") of loss, the negative ("not") denying what might have "become." The arrested life, "astonished," inhabits the poem as a ghostly

unbeing, "a child," an undeveloped psychic double for the "old man" who speaks the words of the poem. Although the man, in existential perplexity, declares

> it is to his grave I most
> frequently return and return
> to ask what is wrong, what was
> wrong . . .

the child is unable to provide insight or to help him "see it all by / the light of a different necessity." That enlightened seeing is the goal of the speaker's quest throughout the poem.

In the third section of the poem, the speaker journeys from the single grave of the child to the "graveyard," but he does not let his audience know where he has arrived until, almost as a macabre aside, he describes "everybody" as

> waiting, particularly, but not for
> me. . . .
> . . . all in the graveyard
> assembled, done for, the world they
> used to wield, have trouble and joy
> in, gone. . . .

Such loss evokes "crying out for / help," the call for someone to "fix this," but there is nothing but "flurry" and "bitter / incompletions." The "knots of / horror, silently raving" and the "empty ends not / completions, not rondures . . ." form double "knots" of "not[s]," such deep negation being all that the "child in me that could not become" finds. From this negative world of the dead, which is the center of the poem, the speaker acknowledges their powerlessness to ease his fear of "change," with its "blessings and / horrors." He grants that the troop of "great ones who / were to return" are not going to "fix this" and "can't come / back with help." Physically alone then, the speaker can only "stand on the stump / of a child" and "yell as far as [he] can" from his own particular "place" in the universe, the one to which he feels inextricably bound:

> . . . I cannot leave this place, for
> me it is the dearest and the worst,
> it is life nearest to life which is
> life lost: it is my place. . . .

Passing from the grave to the graveyard to the "stump / of a child," the speaker discovers his paradoxical knot of truth about "life," that "the life nearest to life" is actually "life lost." That is why his place is at once "the dearest and the worst." The "branches not lofting / boughs into space" and "the barren / air that holds the world that was [his] world" evoke his wordless, physical response, his "tears."

The hope for light and enlightenment that brought him to the grave finds a further paradoxical indeterminacy in the words "burn out," which simultaneously denote both light and dark. A "still" change follows the "flash high-burn / momentary structure of ash" in the last section of the poem, as the speaker moves from "ash" to "Easter morning." The pace of the poem quickens, as the six short declarations joined by colons carry the speaker toward his final vision.

What the man sees replaces the "empty ends," the "bitter incompletions" of the "barren air" with "a sight of bountiful / majesty and integrity." In the flight of the "two great birds," he sees "patterns and routes," a "breaking / from them," and a "return." He sees a "circle," the "rondures" and "completions" he lacked earlier, in the birds' "dance sacred as the sap in / the trees." The use of present participles—"oaring," "looking," "coasting," "resting," "rising," "falling," "having," and "breaking"—to describe the birds underscores their action, their free flight in contrast to the man's earlier entrapment on the "place" where he "must stand and fail." The poem's last lines take the speaker and his audience literally into the light, described as a "flood of burn breaking across us now / from the sun." The references to "breaking," describing both the birds and the man, form a verbal connection between them and suggest that the high "dance" belongs to the man as well.

"Easter Morning" depicts a spiritual journey and verbally walks the reader on that path, joining not only the child and the old man but also the audience within that simple "us." The poem's tone is conversational, and its focus looks to the universally sacred despite the embedded puns on "ash" and "sun," which obviously have Christian connotations. Its resolution is quiet, contemplative. However, Ammons has said that the "really great poet feels as deeply as anyone" yet in his art "touches" and "controls . . . lightly with delicate gestures" and brings the reader to "a quietness" (Stahl, 1986). Such is the graceful power of "Easter Morning."

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Garbage

As *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965), "Essay on Poetics" (1972), "Hibernaculum" (1972), *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (1974), and *The Snow Poems* (1977) amply demonstrate, A.R. Ammons is a master of the long, meandering, meditative poem in the tradition of Wallace Stevens. The 121-page *Garbage* (1993) is arguably Ammons' most aesthetically realized and thematically cogent long poem.

Like *Tape for the Turn of the Year, Garbage* was composed on adding machine tape: "I think of this tape // (this is another tape, a little wider, just about / pentameter) as the showboat churning down the // Mississippi with the banks, the fast currents, / the sandbars, drenchings. . . ." In an interview with Steven P. Schneider (1999), Ammons stated that *Garbage,* written in 1989 "over a period of two or three months . . . was entirely improvisational," neither "premeditated nor . . . ever revised." This buoyant improvisational quality permeates the entire text, which consists of 18 sections, averaging five pages each, of free-verse couplets (sections 1, 3, and 15 end with a single line, and section 6 includes one tercet). The colon, as in a good deal of Ammons' other work, is the dominant way of signifying a pause. One of the few periods in the text comes at the very end.

In *Garbage*'s "'fractal organization,'" Daniel Tobin (1999) finds "relationships of scale in both nature and poetry . . . evident in the grand shifts of perception from microscopic and subatomic to galactic and universal." Helen Vendler (1999) perceives "generic ingredients" in nearly all of the sections: "a) An emotional meditation in the first person . . . ; b) A narrative; c) A scene; d) One or more aphorisms; e) Something ugly or frightening . . . ; f) Something beautiful or reassuring . . . ; g) Remarks about poetry." She notes that Ammons' "interweaving" of these elements "makes any canto seem a farrago of cross-cuts and jump-starts," and that he utilizes a variety of voices—"the rustic, the scientific, the faux-naif, the philosophical, the descriptive, the religious." Sometimes Ammons seems at once to deliver an evocation of spiritual sublimity *and* parody. Early in the poem, gritty, acutely rendered images of processes of men, machines, and incineration atop the garbage mound's "ziggurat" are poised against high-flown abstraction:

> the driver gets out of his truck
> and wanders over to the cliff on the spill and
>
> looks off from the high point into the rosy-fine
> rising of day, the air pure, the wings of the
>
> birds white and clean as angel-food cake: holy, holy,
> holy, the driver cries and flicks his cigarette
>
> in a spiritual swoop that floats and floats before
> it touches ground: here, the driver knows,
>
> where the consummations gather, where the disposal
> flows out of form, where the last translations
>
> cast away their immutable bits and scraps,
> flits of steel, shivers of bottle and tumbler,
>
> here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal
> of renewing change. . . .

Frequently, Ammons alludes to excesses that have contributed so heavily to pollution and "waste management" dilemmas, but he never elaborates an ideological critique or earnestly moralizes. The nightmares of "toxic waste, poison air, beach goo, eroded / roads" are even seen as "possibilities" for positive change and regeneration, ones that "draw nations together" rather than encourage dangerous conflict. Ammons can (seriously?) joke that "the planet is going to // be fine, as soon as the people get off," but he can also consider human ecological resourcefulness. Reporting that "the people at / Marine Shale are said to be 'able to turn // wastes into safe products': but some say these / 'products are themselves hazardous wastes,'" he realizes that

> poetry is itself like an installation at Marine
>
> Shale: it reaches down into the dead pit
> and cool oil of stale recognition and words and
>
> brings up hauls of stringy gook which it arrays
> with light and strings with shiny syllables and
>
> gets the mind into vital relationship with
> communication channels. . . .

In section 1, which does not mention garbage but focuses on the poet's own mortality and need to adapt to circumstances of aging, Ammons meditates on opportunities for "elegance," "simplicity," and "moderation." After a quirky lecture on the virtues of soybeans, he declares, "Social Security can provide / the beans, soys enough," since his "house" is "paid for" and his "young'un / is raised"; materialism for the middle-class individual is no vice but a waste of energy: "nothing one can pay cash for seems // very valuable: that reaches a high enough / benchmark for me—high enough that I wouldn't // know what to do with anything beyond that, no / place to house it, park it, dock it, let it drift // down to. . . ."

Implicitly advocating the moderation of human egotism, *Garbage* holds that nature is the center/origin and that human beings (and their "styrofoam verbiage") are secondary. Further, as Leonard Scigaj (1998) states, "*Garbage* emphasizes homologous shared relationships between humans and various orders of sentient life." In section 2, the speaker announces that the poem "about the pre-socratic idea of the // dispositional axis from stone to wind, wind / to stone (with my elaborations, if any) // is complete before it begins. . . ." As a "scientific poem," *Garbage* asserts "that nature models values, that we / have invented little (copied), reflections of // possibilities already here. . . ." According to Fredrick Buell (1999), Ammons is questioning the emphasis on representation and ideology in recent U.S. cultural theory because "the work of science, like the idea of 'nature,' is not . . . reducible to politically-interested social constructions." Death, decay, and (re)generation dwarf human efforts to create values. However, human beings, Ammons continually emphasizes, "are not . . . / divorced from higher, finer configurations" since

> tissues and holograms of energy circulate in
> us and seek and find representations of themselves
>
> outside us, so that we can participate in
> celebrations high and know reaches of feeling

and sight and thought that penetrate (really
penetrate) far, far beyond these our wet cells. . . .

In its own circulation of "tissues and holograms of energy," *Garbage* is an abundant "celebration" of diverse late-20th-century difficulties and possibilities.

THOMAS FINK

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Sphere: The Form of a Motion

A.R. Ammons' second book-length poem, *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, was published in 1974 and won the Bollingen Prize in Poetry that year. Generally praised by critics, it is widely regarded as one of Ammons' most successful book-length long poems. *Sphere* is divided into 155 numbered sections, with each section consisting of four stanzas of three lines each. The poem is, essentially, one long sentence with almost no punctuation. There are commas and colons, but there is no end stop until the poem, after 79 pages, reaches its end. It is a memorable ride. *Sphere* is a deeply original and wonderfully seductive poem.

Ammons himself speaks of *Sphere* as a breakthrough volume. He had long been attracted to the philosophical problem of "the One and the Many," and the central visual image of *Sphere*, that of the earth as recently photographed from outer space, helped Ammons to think of multiplicity and unity as reconcilable. In *Sphere*, he tells us, he "was able to manage the multifariousness of things and the unity of things so much more easily than I ever had before. I saw a continuous movement between the highest aspects of unity and the multiplicity of things, and it seemed to function so beautifully that I felt I could turn to any subject matter and know how to deal with it." It is as if the image of the earth in space might also be an image of a mind in the world.

Ammons does seem to be able "to turn to any subject matter and know how to deal with it," but he did not always have this ability. The static, constricted, prophetic voice he used in his first book, *Ommateum* (1955), constituted the book's power as well as its limitation. His attempts to introduce a variety of voices into his poetry suggested a poetics, and it is one that he discusses explicitly throughout his subsequent poems. (A cheerfully didactic tone is, after all, one of the voices he taught his poems to accommodate.) By the time he wrote *Sphere*, he had developed a deep confidence in and excitement about his poetic voice(s). In section 44 of *Sphere*, he tells us that his central aim is simply to "attract and hold attention":

this measure moves
to attract and hold attention: when one is not holding one,
that is a way of holding: dip in anywhere, go on until the

attractions fail: I angle for the self in you that can be
held, had in a thorough understanding: not to persuade
you,
enlighten you, not necessarily to delight you, but to hold

you:

The poet attracts and holds our attention by allowing us to watch him try to put his whole mind on the page. (Many first-time readers of *Sphere* will take pleasure in their dawning sense of the outrageousness of the project.) The whole mind, for Ammons, will need many different ways of speaking to express its entirety, and another attractive element of the poem is Ammons' use of various dictions. Scientific language, for example, is present throughout the poem. *Sphere* is also notable for its use of slang. Words such as "snag-gaggling" and "do-funnies" and "gol-danging" and "gurble" fill the poem. Appealing in particular, for some readers, is the constant back-and-forth motion between these ways of speaking.

Motion is, after the first book, crucial to Ammons' poetics; a whole mind on the page would be a dismal thing unless that mind were in constant motion. Such motion must never be simply willed, however. Accidents must be allowed. In *Sphere*, the reader is given not simply the poet's thoughts or meditations but also the thoughts that he *happens* to think. Characteristically, Ammons will then praise his poem for its ability to accommodate the interruption and keep moving. Sometimes he offers us jaunty progress reports, but there are also fresh and arresting meditations on form. Again, form must be, as the subtitle of the poem indicates, "the form of a *motion*." He does not want to write "well-wrought" poems. In section 13, he tells us that "the shapes nearest shapelessness awe us most," and in section 138 he writes, famously, "I don't know about you, / but I'm sick of good poems, all those little rondures / splendidly brought off, painted gourds on a shelf. . . ." Such a poetics has its risks, of course, and Ammons' thrillingly implausible but persuasive lack of anxiety about those risks offers the reader another source of pleasure. Aware of

all the ways in which such a poem can go astray ("we have so many ways to go wrong // and so often go wrong"), Ammons insists that the poem must be allowed to take those ways. He is willing to risk, even asks us to enjoy, "the dull / continuum of the omnium-gatherum."

He really does gather everything up. Readers unsympathetic to Ammons often think of his poems as cold, abstract, windy; he might be putting his whole mind on the page, such readers argue, but it is always only a *mind*. In fact, *Sphere*, like his other poems, is full of powerful emotion, powerfully expressed. The poet gives himself a body and a history. He takes up everyday concerns, both trivial and pressing. He writes about his childhood, about bodily pain, about death in the family. Unsympathetic readers may also feel that he is, so to speak, fixated on motion. Ammons, no doubt, would answer that fixation is, for him, what agony was for Whitman: one of his changes of garments; and a poem such as *Sphere* is about the exuberance with which it uses the space the poet has won for it. We live vicariously inside the deeply attractive way of being that the poem celebrates. What would it feel like to be in creative possession of a whole mind and to be able to take pleasure in the constant motions and countermotions within that mind?

Sphere is an exhilaratingly happy poem, but it is never complacent. Although he finds his most optimistic speculations vindicated everywhere he looks (within or without), the poet is not "at one" with nature or with himself. The dedicatory poem tells us that the poet had not been able to find in nature an image of his "longing." Part of the work of the poem is to imagine a world in which such longing will find images of itself *everywhere*. His longing is for constant motion, and this is a longing that can be satisfied, if not forever, at least for the duration of a book-length poem—hence the happiness. Motion, because it answers to his deepest appetites, is spoken of affectionately. There are varieties of motion, he tells us: motion can mean moseying or floating or sailing. A student of all the varieties of motion, he insists perhaps most of all on the freedom to move between kinds of motion. At the very end of the poem, offering us the image of the earth sailing through space, he imagines his happiness as belonging to everyone, and one feels that his deepest purpose in the poem has been to make us believe that his happiness is within our reach.

NICK HALPERN

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Bruce Andrews 1948–

A central figure in what would come to be known—with whatever utility—as Language poetry, Bruce Andrews has maintained a consistently uncompromising position at the most radical extreme of the literary avant-garde. In numerous books of poetry and a collection of innovative critical essays, the significance of his writing has developed in direct proportion to its restiveness.

Andrews spent the summer of 1968 in Paris, and significantly, his earliest poetry dates from the moment immediately following the Situationist-inspired revolution of May of that year. Following his stay in France Andrews continued his undergraduate study of political science, writing a dissertation comparing French and American imperialism in Southeast Asia and later becoming a professor of political science at Fordham University. From this perspective outside both English departments and the creative writing programs that were proliferating in the 1970s, Andrews has developed a particularly sophisticated politics of poetic practice.

In terms similar to those of his colleague Jed Rasula ("The Politics of, the Politics in," 1987), Andrews differentiates between the thematic and formal politics of writing, calling for a poetry not *about* politics but actually *as* politics. One would locate that political practice of writing neither in a poem's ability to mobilize its audience nor in its thematic content, but rather in what is signified by its form, enacted by its structures, and implicit in its philosophy of language. One would also consider the poem as a material object: how it was produced, distributed, and exchanged. Moreover, the politics of a poem (in contradistinction to the politics *in* the poem) would hinge on how the language positions its reader *vis-à-vis* both the writer and language itself. Accordingly, Andrews' exceedingly demanding writing has often been seen as a prime example of the kind of poetry that requires a high degree of reader participation, thus transforming the author's authoritarian monologue into a more egalitarian and productive dialogue.

The particular difficulty of Andrews' poetry is also the source of its distinction; even within the tradition of the avant-garde there are few texts as radically anti-semantic. Andrews' poems do not simply mask or distance their referential "meaning" but actually oppose the very grounds of reference itself. The work is not merely

difficult to explicate; it actually puts the very notion of explication into question. "There is nothing to decipher," as he writes in the early essay "Text and Context" (1977), "There is nothing to explain." Emphasizing the opaque materiality and artifice of language—the insubordination of words—his poetry challenges and frustrates the conception of language as either transparent or instrumental. The politics of such difficulty are manifest; Andrews' poems aggressively refuse assimilation to any conventionally available mode of reading, obviating the status quo by demanding new ways of thinking about and engaging language. To alter consciousness by disrupting language has long been the dream of a politicized avant-garde, but Andrews' poetics provide an especially sophisticated version of the revolution of the word, positing linguistic structures as analogous to social formations and recognizing the social ground against which even the most abstract play of the signifier occurs.

The most abstract of Andrews' own poetry was written in the early and mid-1970s. His most distinctive work from this period isolates small constellations of grammatically and thematically disjunctive words, discrete syllables, and phonemes. Often creating unprecedented combinations of letters, these poems are clearly analogues to the revolutionary *zaum'* [transrational] language of the Russian Futurists, as well as to contemporary experimental writing by Carl Andre, Clark Coolidge, and Peter Inman. Andrews' early poetry focuses attention on the edges of linguistic particles and the way in which nonreferential aspects of language can organize thematically disparate and grammatically disjunctive vocabularies. More generally, these poems explore the fits and faults of stress and pressure at which different discourses intersect. In "Swaps Ego" (1978), for instance, specialized vocabularies are re-contextualized by the collision between the scientific language of what seems to be some sort of linguistics text with what appears to be names drawn from a sporting paper such as *The Daily Racing Form*. In the resultant mesh of language, themes only latent in the source texts emerge newly animated by the tension between atomized words and the pull of an emergent syntax: "Distinctly Luck Coal Stern," "Limited Capital Cupola Plosive," "Noise Hypotenuse." The language of these poems is motivated along multiple, but unprivileged axes; the reader does not know which suggestions of "meaning" to focus on. The collision of irreconcilable elements—the racing form names and the linguistics text—frustrates both the referential pull of the signs (the original meanings of the words in their usual contexts) and the inevitable, if tenuous, invitations of even the most paratactic syntax to establish conceptual associations (the suggestive new "meanings" the words seem to acquire simply from being arranged together). In these poems language idles, the gears grating.

Near the end of the 1970s, as evinced in works like "Confidence Trick" and "I Guess Work the Time Up" (1980–81), the units of composition in Andrews' poems began to include larger, more syntactically coherent phrases and to incorporate the confrontational and controversial samples of social discourse that would characterize *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)* (1992). While the highly ironized and ventriloquizing transcriptions of public speech in these works may initially appear more accessible than the earlier nonlexical work, the writing is still significantly anasemantic. Although the content of these phrases is frequently provocative and offensive—"suck the testicles," "*sink* the boat people"—the emphasis is less on the particular content of the phrases than on the social work undertaken by such language. The disjunctive and irreconcilable contexts of the phrases underscore the sorts of social and psychological constructions that language enables, enacts, and structures.

Coincident with this marked stylistic shift, Andrews' compositional process changed as well. Habitually jotting down individual words, or small constellations of words on small pieces of paper, Andrews amasses a large amount of material that is then organized into larger structures, often at a much later date. With that montage (the physical, material dimension of which should not be overlooked), the emphasis in writing thus shifts from expressive production to editing.

Indeed editing, in a broader sense, has been an important part of Andrews' contribution to contemporary writing. The term "language-centered" writing was coined by Andrews in the early 1970s, and between 1978 and 1981 he co-edited the eponymous journal $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ with Charles Bernstein. The journal provided a key critical forum for the community of poets whose work was being published simultaneously in magazines such as *Hills* (edited by Bob Perelman), *Roof* (edited by James Sherry), *Tottel's* (edited by Ron Silliman), and *This* (edited by Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten). Featuring critical, theoretical, and review essays—frequently in the form of collaged texts and various modes of "composition as explanation"—$L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ sought to emphasize the type of work that has made Andrews' own poetry so distinctive. In "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis" (1988) he described it as

> a spectrum of writing that places its attention primarily on language and ways of making meaning, that takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program, or subject matter.

CRAIG DWORKIN

See also Language Poetry

Biography

Born in Chicago, Illinois, 1 April 1948. Attended Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, B.A. and M.A. 1970; Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971–75, Ph.D.; administrative assistant in arts and humanities program, Bureau of Research, United States Office of Education, Washington, D.C., 1969; assistant to the director, President's Commission on International Trade and Investment Policy, Washington, D.C., 1970; consultant to planning staff, National Institute of Education, 1971; since 1975 member of the Political Science Department, Fordham University, Bronx, New York; co-editor, *Toothpick*, 1974; editor, with Charles Bernstein, $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ journal of poetics, 1978–81; member of the editorial collective, *New Political Science*, 1979–82. Living in New York City.

Poetry

Edge (includes prose), 1973
Corona, 1973
Vowels, 1976
Praxis, 1978
Film Noir, 1978
Sonnets: (Memento Mori), 1980
Jeopardy, 1980
R and B, 1981
Wobbling, 1981

Love Songs, 1982
Excommunicate, 1982
Factura, 1987
Give 'Em Enough Rope, 1987
Both Both (with Bob Cobbing), 1987
Getting Ready to Have Been Frightened, 1988
Only/Transblucency, 1990
Standpoint, 1990
Executive Summary, 1990
I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism), 1992
STET, SIC and SP, 1992
Tizzy Boost, 1993
Divestiture-E, 1993
Divestiture-A, 1994
Blue Horizon, 1994
Strictly Confidential, 1994
Ex Why Zee: Performance Texts (with Sally Silvers), 1995
Spectacular Diseases, 1998
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Maya Angelou 1928–

Although her early poetry collection *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, Maya Angelou's poems receive much less critical attention and acclaim than her autobiographies. Her autobiographies have been praised for their honest, vibrant depictions of African-American women's lives in the United States and abroad and, because of their broad dissemination, have fostered social transformations regarding black awareness and equal rights. Angelou's nonfiction explicitly details her pains: divorced parents; childhood rape; unwed teenage motherhood; sexual prostitution; and diverse discriminations in Arkansas, California, and even Africa because she is black, female, non-Muslim, non-Arab, and six-feet tall. Although her poetry also addresses her displacement from and desire to belong to a community, the majority of print responses to her poetry appear as essays in reference works or as book reviews in major newspapers or periodicals such as *Library Journal*, *Horn Book Magazine*, and *Booklist*, rather than in exclusively literary publications.

Angelou herself considers her poetry and plays among her works of autobiography. During an interview with Dolly Aimee McPherson (1990), she asserted that "every writer writes autobiographically anyway, whether he's Eugene O'Neill or Arthur Miller or Paul Laurence Dunbar." Social oppression operates in every human life on some level, Angelou contends, and writers—male, female, white, black, playwright, poet—capture such experiences and respond to them. More so than O'Neill, Miller, and Dunbar, Angelou provides hope for an individual's ability to confront oppression and to cultivate grace, beauty, wisdom, and joy in the process. Her poetry, like her prose, shows personas in pain but celebrating life nonetheless. Her poetry merits attention not only for its ability to enhance a reader's understanding of her autobiographical prose but also as autobiographical writing in its own right, rich and varied in voice, plot, and theme.

Angelou's prose can similarly enhance a reader's understanding of her poetry and its influences. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) takes its title from the last line in "Sympathy," a poem composed by late-19th-century African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar; *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) echoes the title of a 1918 volume of poetry by Harlem Renaissance poet and playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson. Her prose reveals her long-held fondness for African-American speech in the family, in the community, in the pulpit, on the lectern, on the page. Prose works describing her role, at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference place Angelou's poems in an illuminating context of political activism. Her account of her own five years of silence following a childhood rape, and her ensuing discovery of poetry (first of others, then her own) as the medium back to the speaking world, reveals the foundation of her deeply held belief in the transforming power of poetry.

Attributes of African-American oral performances appear in Angelou's poetry, but the political climate during which she began publishing her poetry did not necessitate rhetorical clichés associated with Uncle Toms and Aunt Jemimas. Angelou identifies violent behaviors toward women and African-Americans wherever she may find them: in homes, communities, and cultures. Accordingly, Angelou's poems do not flinch from harsh criticism of intimates or strangers. In *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*, Angelou asserts that, given the violence she witnesses, "I have no pity." She berates herself for her apathy; but rather than restore in herself any initial sympathy she might have had for the oppressors, she strives to cultivate more courage to articulate her outrage: "My sin lies in not screaming loud"; "Deafened and unwilling [to speak out] / We aided in the killing." By her next volume of poetry, *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975), Angelou declaimed her position more forcefully:

> Here then is my
> Christian lack:
> If I'm struck then
> I'll strike back.

Other transformations occurred between texts as well. In *Just Give*, she mourned her losses and beseeched others to value her, seemingly finding one rejection or loss after another. In *Oh Pray*, however, she invokes her audience to

> Give me your hand.
>
> Make room for me
> to lead and follow
> you
> beyond this rage of poetry.

Although Angelou knew and respected Malcom X, her tone takes a turn away from anger and toward forgiveness. The change parallels her forgiveness of herself, her own growing self-confidence and self-respect, which allowed her to condemn wrongs without condemning the violators, as in "Phenomenal Woman" and "Life Doesn't Frighten Me," both from *And Still I Rise* (1978).

Angelou's early poetry, with its cycle of renewed hope and ensuing hurts, contained signs of the renewal of innocence that would strongly characterize her later poems. This later work emphasizes the need for individual self-respect, arguing that therein lies an abundance of power and blessings. One could argue that Angelou's move toward more inclusive, inspirational poetry corresponded with her attainment of greater financial and political power. But this style mimics the blues tradition of using laughter or a lively beat rather than tears to cope with hardships. Early works like "Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition" and "Harlem Hopscotch" in *Just Give* and "Song for the Old Ones" in *Oh Pray* reflect this technique as much as later poems like "Woman Work" in *And Still I Rise* and "A Good Woman Feeling Bad" in *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (1983). Her later poems encourage connections among individuals by demonstrating that life can be improved by cultivating respect for differences as well as commonalities.

Angelou's autobiographies—whether prose or poetry—call for transformations: transformation of anger into love, transformations outside one's self and in one's social matrix but also—just as importantly—transformations within one's self. She insists that an individual must not be silenced for long, must not become anesthetized by life's traumas, but rather must learn from experience and re-create one's self without denying the past and all of its baggage. Angelou said during an interview on 30 July 1981:

> All of my work, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith. While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated. In fact the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure. (McPherson, 1990)

Out of violence, out of silence, Maya Angelou creates beauty and finds power in her poetry, passing her lessons on to her readers.

DESHAE E. LOTT

Biography

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, 4 April 1928. Attended schools in Arkansas and California; worked as actress, singer, composer, television host and interviewer; associate editor, *Arab Observer*, Cairo, 1961–62; assistant administrator, School of Music and Drama, University of Ghana Institute of African Studies, Legon and Accra, 1963–66; freelance writer for *Ghanaian Times* and Ghanaian Broadcasting Corporation, both Accra, 1963–65; feature editor, *African Review*, Accra, 1964–66; Lecturer, University of California, Los Angeles, 1966; writer-in-residence, University of Kansas, Lawrence, 1970; visiting professor, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1974; Wichita State University, Kansas, 1974; and California State University, Sacramento, 1974; since 1981 Reynolds Professor, Wake Forest University; writer for Oprah Winfrey television series *Brewster Place*; northern coordinator, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1959–60; member, American Revolution Bicentennial Council, 1975–76; member, advisory board, Women's Prison Association; since 1975 member, board of trustees, American Film Institute; wrote and delivered presidential inaugural poem, 1993. Received Yale University fellowship, 1970; Rockefeller grant, 1975; *Ladies Home Journal* Award, 1976; honorary Litt.D., Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, 1975; Mills College, Oakland, California, 1975; Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin, 1976. Living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Poetry

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie, 1971
Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well, 1975
And Still I Rise, 1978
Poems, 1981
Shaker, Why Don't You Sing? 1983

Now Sheba Sings the Song, 1987
I Shall Not Be Moved, 1990
Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now, 1993
On the Pulse of Morning: The Inaugural Poem, 1993
The Poetry of Maya Angelou, 1993
The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou, 1994
Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women, 1994
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Other Writings: plays, screenplays, television play, television documentaries (*Trying to Make It Home*, 1988), autobiography (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969), nonfiction, children's literature.

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Anthologies, Textbooks, and Canon Formation

If a student of poetry were to visit campuses—whether small community colleges or Ivy League universities, whether in California, Kansas, or Maine—and look at all the syllabi for courses that contain American poetry, the student would notice a substantial overlap among the poems and poets being taught. Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man" would appear on almost every instructor's list, as would Marianne Moore's "Poetry." Similarly, after examining the anthologies of American literature used by all the professors in these colleges and universities, the student would notice that the poets listed in the tables of contents were, with a few exceptions, the same.

How does this happen? How does a certain poet, or group of poets, get included in an anthology? Why do certain poems get reprinted over and over again, taught and re-taught, while thousands of poems and scores of poets go unnoticed? Most important, who decides which poems students will read and which they will not?

The answer to these questions can be found in the complicated process called "canon formation," the term scholars use to describe the way in which certain works are repeatedly chosen to be taught, memorized, and written about by students and literary critics. These chosen works are then said to be part of the literary canon. In the case of poetry, canon formation is a distinctly academic process. Because poetry has little economic viability and a rather small readership, the decisions about which poems get taught are made inside universities, by professors who teach and also by professors who, by and large, put together college textbooks and anthologies. Anthologization is an especially potent force in the formation of the poetry canon because individual volumes of poetry usually do not stay in print for very long. The survival of a poem often depends on whether or not it has been included in an anthology—more specifically, an anthology that itself has longevity. Thus professors and students are limited first by the choices that anthologists make, and second by how much a particular anthology is used. Those collections that are not bought by professors rapidly disappear from publishers' lists, along with many of the poems contained within.

Professors and anthologists, then, wield a great deal of power in constructing a canon. So who are these anthologists, one asks, and how do readers know they can be trusted? It seems a logical question, but strangely enough, no one asked it for more than half of the 20th century because consensus on the canon among professors and editors was so strong. By the end of the 20th century, however, critics and readers had become more skeptical. Scholars argued that the previous consensus had been possible only because the people who made the decisions were themselves so similar: white men of fairly well-to-do backgrounds, many of whom had been educated in Ivy League institutions and taught by professors like themselves.

By 1960 the process of canonization came under fire as universities began to reflect changes in the economic and political structure of the country. In the late 1940s and 1950s the G.I. Bill enabled many men who would not previously have been able to afford it to go to college or graduate school. In the 1960s the

women's liberation movement took hold and black nationalist groups grew; in the 1970s the interest in ethnic derivation, as well as the increase of new immigrants, transformed universities. By the 1980s, as creative writing grew into an academic discipline, many poets and fiction writers had become faculty. Thus many different potential anthologists entered the academic establishment. An anthologist could be a 35-year-old Asian-American man who grew up in Chinatown in New York City, educated at City College; a 60-year-old woman, a native of New England and a graduate of Harvard; or an African-American man who grew up in the South and attended the University of Mississippi, his tuition paid by the government. Is there any reason to assume that their lists of the best poems would be the same or would share any overlap? The answer to these questions is no, and yes, depending upon one's position.

Postmodern critics as well as those groups whose works had been largely excluded from the canon argued that the literary canon was only an expression of cultural power. Their argument, greatly oversimplified, went as follows: when someone chooses what he or she thinks is best, he or she is expressing personal values and interests. If that person wields more cultural authority than another person, then his or her decisions will carry more weight; thus decisions about canonization are just the expression of (and an attempt to retain) political and cultural power. Although this argument seemed fairly obvious to some, to more traditional critics it seemed like heresy. They argued that literary qualities were immutable and transcendent, and that there were standards that everyone—regardless of race, creed, class, or gender—could appreciate. This issue has been debated long and hard behind university walls and in academic journals, and some would say it occupied scholars for the better part of the second half of the 20th century. The rise and prominence of French theory and theorists, principally Deconstruction and Historicism, also contributed to the ferocity of this discussion.

While the protracted debate about what and who to teach has at times seemed overwhelming, there can be no doubt that universities, syllabi, textbooks, and anthologies changed as a result. Women writers are more fully represented in anthologies and syllabi, as are minority and dissident writers. As universities began to offer courses in minority literatures, publishing houses had to adapt their lists of textbooks and anthologies to accommodate these changing syllabi. This trend was notable as early as the 1960s, when several important anthologies of African-American literature emerged. Arnold Adoff's *The Poetry of Black America* (1973) recovered lost poems and poets in an attempt to make a new canon. Florence Howe's *No More Masks!* (1973), which collected poetry written by women, was dedicated to

> our sisters
> in jail
> underground
> at war
> whose lives are their poems.

By the 1990s, W.W. Norton, the preeminent publisher of college textbook anthologies, published a best-selling collection of African-American literature, of Southern American literature, and of Jewish-American literature. Nor is it uncommon to find offerings in Native American, in Asian-American, and in Latino-American literature on publishers' lists. A not-atypical poetry anthology, *Unsettling America* (1994) collects the work of diverse ethnic and political voices and announces in its introduction that the editors "chose poems that directly address the instability of American identity and confront the prevalence of cultural conflict and exchange within the United States."

If all the poems in these anthologies have not become canonized, their presence has broadened the scope of what might be considered canonical in the next generation. Clearly the canon looks different than it did 50, or even 20, years ago, but variations of race, gender, and class have also remained within a certain spectrum. For instance, professors who have wanted to add a woman to their syllabi have overwhelmingly chosen Elizabeth Bishop or H.D.; professors who have wanted to represent more heavily the contribution of African-American writers have by and large chosen Gwendolyn Brooks or Langston Hughes. Moreover, the presence of traditional white male writers may have been trimmed, but it still remains substantial. A reader simply would not find an anthology of American literature that does not include T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" or Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro." Thus, although the canon has shifted with political and cultural tides, there are still many points of consensus; what the academy deems canonical has stretched but not lost its shape.

Despite the challenges to canonicity that occurred in the second half of the 20th century, standards of evaluation have never strayed too far from the century's principal artistic movement: perhaps no word has dominated the evaluation of American poetry in the 20th century more than the word "Modernism." Indeed, the values of Modernism and its associate, Postmodernism, have spelled out the formula to which critics respond. When exactly modern poetry begins is open to interpretation; certainly scholars have called some 19th-century poets "modern." It has become popular, for instance, to understand Emily Dickinson's crisis of faith as a precursor to later Modernist ennui. Calling Dickinson a precursor to modern poetry has substantially elevated her place in the 20th-century canon. Similarly, the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* begins with Walt Whitman, also a 19th-century writer, a radical stylist who also paved the way for later Modernist innovation.

There can be no doubt, however, that a gathering storm of Modernist energy, what Ezra Pound called a "vortex," grew between 1910 and 1920. The *annus mirabilus* of Modernism, 1922—which saw the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses,* William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury,* and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"—forever changed the canons of American poetry. The most important anthologies of the 20th century have included "modern" in their title, from Louis Untermeyer's influential *Modern American Poets* (1919) up to Norton's modern and postmodern anthologies, the virtual Goliaths of the field. For many editors a 20th-century poem was not worth studying unless it fell under the heading "modern."

Modernism, a radical way to use language, to reinvent forms, and to challenge cultural norms, saw the world afresh. As an ideological system, it reacted against conventional institutions, and national affiliations were of course among these. Thus in the early decades of the 20th century anthologists tried to shed the 19th-century ideal of Americanism as a literary value. With Modernism came the radical idea that the best American poets resist the national climate, rather than support and express the cultural values of their time. T.S. Eliot, perhaps the most influential poet and critic of the century, could not even decide whether he was European

or American, and in fact, both British and American anthologists claim him.

With "The Waste Land," however, Eliot wanted to transcend national identity and write a poem with universal, rather than local, applications. Revolutionary for many reasons, "The Waste Land" was initially remarkable for its difficulty: when it first appeared, it seemed incomprehensible. Eliot defended it in his canon-making essay, "The Metaphysical Poets":

> We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity. . . . The poet must become more and more comprehensive. More allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into meaning.

Considering how central "The Waste Land" has become to the study of 20th-century poetry, it is important to remember the great controversy the poem initiated. Such a moment of controversy often precedes an artifact's entrance into the canon. In the first years of the poem's publication, many critics accused Eliot of willful obscurity, impenetrability, and incomprehensibility. Other critics immediately attempted to decipher the poem's vast array of classical and mythical allusions, its fractured narrative, and its alternating voices. When the dust cleared, not only was "The Waste Land" considered the preeminent poem of the age, but Eliot was, as American poet Delmore Schwartz called him, the undisputed "dictator of the literary world." Moreover, the characteristics of the poem—once considered liabilities by some—were now clearly seen as virtues; difficulty, obscurity, ambiguity, allusiveness, and fragmentation became necessary for the modern poem to accurately represent the complexities of modern life. Innovative poetry came to be more highly valued than the merely commonplace.

The degree to which Eliot's own essays dictated the response to "The Waste Land" has been documented. As one anonymous reviewer observed as early as 1923, "Thank goodness Eliot finally wrote the poem to which he can apply his own critical theories." The critical theories were not only applied to his poetry, however, but to many other poems and poets of that era as well. Additionally, Eliot was not the only poet/critic who gained prominence at that time: Ezra Pound, Conrad Aiken, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Randall Jarrell, to name a few, wrote literary essays that justified the kinds of poems they themselves were writing. Several consequences emerged from this pairing of the poet-critic. First, modern poetry seemed to become more and more removed from a general readership, becoming an elite and elevated discourse that only poets, critics, and professors seemed to understand. Second, as literary study became further and further removed from popular discourse, the divide between the popular and the academic or "literary" became a wide, unbridgeable chasm. What ultimately emerged was a cynical, even censorious, view of mass culture derived from Eliot, who firmly upheld the very important divide. In other words, for Modernist critics, a popular artist—almost by definition—could not be much good. The commonplace was quickly deemed unliterary.

"New Criticism," a scholarly school that descended from the Southern Agrarian movement, a group that also prized their distance from mass culture, followed the precepts of Modernism. Several of the New Critics, themselves poet/critics, became interested in discussing the poem primarily as a "literary document" rather than an ethical or historical one. The editors of a highly influential textbook of this period, *Understanding Poetry* (1938, still in print), Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, both New Critics, advocated study of the poem as a formal document. That meant probing its surface for all the potentialities of language. These prescripts arose in opposition to what the poem might mean in a political, cultural, or biographical context.

It is impossible to overstate just how significant New Criticism has been in the development of the canon of 20th-century American poetry. Generations of scholars trained to read poems "closely" valued poems that yielded fruitfully to this type of inquiry. Poems that could be dissected, analyzed, explained, and endlessly and variously interpreted were prized more heavily than poems that had easily accessible and cogent messages. Professors became interpreters, specially trained individuals with the knowledge to decode obscure or even indecipherable passages. As Gerald Graff (1987) has pointed out, part of the success of the New Critical approach was the advantage it offered to professors. Graff explains,

> I remember the relief I felt as a beginning assistant professor when I realized that by concentrating on the text itself I could get a good discussion going about almost any literary work without having to know anything about its author, its circumstances of composition, or the history of its reception.

Modernism, an international aesthetic movement, and New Criticism, a formal, sometimes almost scientific mode of inquiry, were not hospitable to political writers. The large number of political poems written during the early decades of the 20th century seemed to disappear as anthologists, following Modernist guidelines, banished political poems from anthologies and textbooks for almost 50 years. When a poet like Langston Hughes, an outspoken Communist and activist, was anthologized, editors included only his mildest, most apolitical poems. Indeed, the recovery and publication of Hughes' strident political voice, as well as that of other Harlem Renaissance poets, has been a job for literary critics in the closing decades of the 20th century. Similarly, the other leftist poets of the 1930s and 1940s also began to reappear in American anthologies. The *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (2nd edition, 1994), for instance, made it a point to resurrect writers like Genevieve Taggard and Kenneth Fearing under the heading, "A Sheaf of Political Poetry in the Modern Period."

Indeed, one can understand the canon of American poetry at the end of the 20th century as a response to, or a correction of, Modernist principles of evaluation. If William Carlos Williams was right that the publication of "The Waste Land" was the great catastrophe to American letters, and that it destroyed the national idiom for almost half a century, then Williams might have found cause for celebration in the changing canon of Postmodernism. Other anthologies, like Joel Conarroe's *Eight American Poets* (1994), have sought to reconstruct a canon of "classic" American poets.

In the reappraisal of Modernism and the subsequent revisions of the canon, Eliot, his poetry, and his criticism, as well as New Criticism have come under attack. Not only did political writers slowly re-enter the canon, but those premodern writers who were more accessible and popular, such as Edwin Arlington Robinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, have also regained status. Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley have also been antholo-

gized in both *Postmodern American Poetry* (Hoover, 1996) and *Contemporary American Poetry* (Poulin, 1996). Although it seems somewhat ironic that writers who launched their careers challenging authority are now part of the literary canon, often the writers who at first seem the most extreme are the writers later embraced as visionary. The entrance of Beat writers into the canon also illustrates the rising importance that postmodern critics have given to popular culture. Rather than bemoaning the presence of film, television, or the Internet, postmodern art and theory have explored their presence in contemporary consciousness. A 1999 anthology of poems about popular culture, *Real Things* (Elledge and Swartwout), would not have been possible or even desirable two decades earlier.

But even as certain evaluative principles of Modernism continue to be challenged, a surprising consistency remains in what professors and critics value. John Ashbery, perhaps the most critically esteemed poet of the 20th century, writes notoriously difficult poems, and the complaints about his work—incomprehensibility, obscurity, ambiguity—are not unlike those first leveled at Eliot. Ashbery's fans, as Eliot's were, are among the most important literary critics in the country, and their opinions go a long way toward the construction of the canon. In the 1990s, work had already begun in probing the seemingly impenetrable surfaces of Ashbery's poems. If literary history repeats itself, it will not be long before a whole critical lexicon springs up to deal with his "difficulty."

HILENE FLANZBAUM

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David Antin 1932–

The poetry of David Antin is an extension of his life as an art critic, a performance artist, and a translator and reflects his deep interest in science, philosophy, and linguistics. His poetry, in this regard, challenges the boundary of what constitutes a poem and, thereby, embodies the postmodern characteristic of pushing at the preconceived notions of the genre of poetry by blending the visual with the performative, poetic, scientific, and philosophical.

Born on 1 February 1932 in New York City, Antin spent the majority of his first 25 years in and around New York and, subsequently, is often associated with other New York poets, such as Jerome Rothenberg and Armand Schwerner. After earning a B.A. in science from the City College of New York (now the City University of New York) in 1955, Antin dedicated himself to both poetry and art criticism, and his early, more imagistic poetry is heavily influenced by the visual artists of New York City and especially by Pop and Postpop painters such as Warhol, Lichtenstein, and Wesselman. Employing methods similar to those of these painters, Antin's early poetry engages popular culture and especially the way that meaning is created, structured, and negotiated in and by language.

In December 1960 Antin married Eleanor Fineman, a highly acclaimed performance artist, and the couple continued to live and work in New York City. During the period between 1962 and 1966, Antin translated various scientific works into English, all of which were high-level studies of mathematics and/or physics, and traces of the ideas from those texts are evident in many of the early poems as well as in Antin's poetic mode of inquiry.

In 1966 Antin earned an M.A. in linguistics from New York University, where his graduate project concentrated on the language structure of Gertrude Stein, who, along with Charles Olson, the Black Mountain poets, and the Objectivists, was an important early influence on his work. Antin's interest in science and linguistics is clearly evident in his writings and especially in his sustained interrogation of how the structuring and codifying of meaning alters the social modes of communication. In the late 1960s, Antin broke with an image-based poetry, which he describes as "more decorative than meaningful and incapable of addressing the kinds of things that were coming insistently to my mind . . . language and politics." The scientific mode of inquiry and his interest in linguistics offered a lens for him to consider the social aspects of language and meaning, and the fusing of the scientific and the linguistic is evident in his book *Definitions* (1967). "Definitions for Mendy," for example, is a sustained meditation on the scientific, linguistic, and emotional aspects of loss. The poem opens with an almost clinical "definition" that serves as the ideational fulcrum for the poem as a whole:

loss is an unintentional decline in or disappearance of
a value arising from a contingency
a value is an efficacy a power a brightness
it is also a duration.

A number of different perspectives and structures for understanding loss are given throughout the poem—all of which bear on the issue of coming to terms with the death of Mendy. The conclusion renders the difficulty of comprehending death by fusing scientific language with a poetic mode of description:

the eye cannot discriminate true intensities of light
only their ratios
similarly the ear
cannot distinguish among sounds that are very high or low
in the dark all cats are black
what color are they in a blinding light

How the mind comprehends and rationalizes things such as death, loss, and duration is questioned, and, like the larger body of Antin's writing, the poem explores the relationship of language and value.

Antin's early poems challenge the traditional conception of the poem as a recapitulation of an experience and propose a more fluid, associationally rich poetry that is more akin to the cognitive processes of the mind. The process-oriented poetry in the books from the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as *Autobiography* (1967), *Definitions* (1967), and *Code of Flag Behavior* (1968)—all of which are collected in *Selected Poems: 1963–1973* (1991)—develops the poetic prototype of what would emerge as Antin's signature poetic mode, the "talk" poem, with its propensity for sustained inquiry and meditation. The first talk poem appeared in 1972 in *Talking*.

Antin describes these poems as

> improvised talk pieces [where] I go to some particular place to create—in public, as improvisations. I go to a particular place with something in mind but no clear way of saying it, and in the place I come to I try to find some way to deal with what I am interested in, in a way that is meaningful to both the audience and myself. ("David Antin," Contemporary Authors Online, 2000)

The poem, therefore, is a heightened version of Charles Olson's conception of "Projective Poetry," whereby the poem is the means and vehicle of discovery of content, as in Olson's tenet that "form is an extension of content." Antin elevates projective poetry to the performative level. Such talks reveal Antin's shrewd and engaging mind grappling with a concept or idea in a startlingly fresh way. A passage from his talk poem "the river" from *What It Means To Be Avant-Garde* (1993) aptly depicts the gist of such poems:

because talking for me is the closest I can come
as a poet to thinking and I wanted for a long
time a kind of poetry of talking not a poetry of thought
but a poetry of thinking since getting so close to the
process of thinking was what I thought the poem was

The energy and force of the thinking is the heart of the talk poem and brings his poetry closer to the realm of performance art since it engages an idea or a concept within the dynamic of a social setting.

The last 20 years of Antin's writing career have been dedicated to the talk poem, yet it should not be overlooked that Antin continues to push at the boundaries of poetry and the conception of an audience in other ways as well. In 1987, he began "SKYPOEM," a long poem to be written gradually in the air, thereby proposing an even more "public" poetry.

Since 1972 Antin has taught full-time the structure of art, the history of criticism, and other courses in the Visual Arts Department of the University of California, San Diego. His wife, Eleanor Antin, also teaches in the program, and they currently live in La Jolla, California.

DAVID CLIPPINGER

Biography

Born in Brooklyn, New York, 1 February 1932. Attended City College, New York, B.A. 1955; New York University (Lehman Fellow), 1964–66, M.A. in linguistics 1966; freelance editor and translator, 1956–57; chief editor and scientific director, Research Information Service, New York, 1958–60; freelance editor and consultant, Dover Press, New York, 1959–64; curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1967; Director of the University Art Gallery and Assistant Professor of Visual Arts, 1968–72, Professor of Visual Arts, 1972–92, and Emeritus Professor, University of California, San Diego; founding editor, with Jerome Rothenberg, *Some/Thing*, New York, 1964; contributing editor, *Alcheringa*, New York, 1972–80; member of the editorial board, University of California Press, San Diego, 1972–76, and since 1979, *New Wilderness*. Received Longview Award, 1960; University of California Creative Arts Award, 1972; Guggenheim fellowship, 1976; National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, 1983. Living in La Jolla, California.

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Code of Flag Behavior, 1968
Meditations, 1971
Talking, 1972
After the War (A Long Novel with Few Words), 1973
Talking at the Boundaries, 1976
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Antiwar Poetry. *See* War and Antiwar Poetry

Rae Armantrout 1947–

Rae Armantrout burst onto the American literary scene in the late 1970s with refreshing metaphors and inventive narratives. Her poetry constitutes a growing awareness of complex contingent relationships between the world and language itself. Primarily interested in the way the mind creates associations, Armantrout breaks away from conventional metaphors, linear narratives, and traditional ways of sense-making to compose refreshingly innovative thematic and imagistic connections. Her poetry developed from early subversive counter-narratives into increasingly sophisticated play with syntax, sentences, prose poetry, and voice, all of which explicitly address the arbitrary nature of language and truth. By the 1980s and early 1990s Armantrout had established herself as an avant-garde poet in an age of postmodernism and cultural materialism. Her poetry points to the panoply of inter-related social and linguistic threads that construct identity.

From her earliest work, *Extremities* (1978), to *Made to Seem* (1995), Armantrout develops an astute perception of the provisional possibilities of truth-making and truth-telling. Skeptical and subversive, each volume questions assumptions of a universal standard of truth and authenticity, opposing the construction of familiar narratives of authority or conformity with parodic versions of the same story. "Generation" revises the Hansel and Gretel tale by eliminating the characters and setting of the story, leaving the reader with a more abstract and open-ended representation. The narrative is less a matter of what really transpires in the woods than it is a careful attention to the choices a writer makes when constructing a narrative. Such extreme measures foreground writing (and reading) as a matter of choice.

Armantrout's second volume of poems, *The Invention of Hunger* (1979), is comprised of 19 parts made of prose sentences and sentence fragments. Much of the work details the disjunctive relationships between generations of family members and the fragmented representations of identity in these contexts. *Precedence* (1985) and *Necromance* (1991) build upon the fictive notions of identity. Both works move out of the more personal and familial contexts, however, into broader commentaries on American culture. Armantrout's contention with conventional narratives plays out in her resistance to authority and social structures in increasingly unexpected and cryptic narratives. Several poems from both works, such as "Fiction" and "Bases," foreground the fragile connections between the real and imagined, paying close attention to fabrications and romantic illusions of "true" or "authentic" American identity. Moreover, the poems lay bare the devices of these simulations by pointing out the parameters of their construction. Armantrout continually examines the modes of telling the story rather than completing the actual story itself. Questioning rather than answering, foregrounding authorship, she plays with signifiers, leaving out images or ideas to undermine the assumption that the speaker and/or author will locate meaning for the reader.

Made to Seem (1995) continues this counteracting process against conventional "natural-ness." While many poems in *Necromance* ("Fiction," "Pairs," "Context," "Necromance") play with voice and challenge "narrative sense-making," they often seem to have no definitive voice at all. These lines from "Attention" are representative:

Ventriloquy
is the mother tongue.

Can you colonize rejection
by phrasing your request,
"Me want?"

Song: "I'm not a baby.
Wa, Wa, Wa.

I'm not a baby.
Wa, Wa, Wa.

I'm crazy
like you."

The "you"
in the heart of
molecule and ridicule.

In *Made to Seem* the speakers of the poems *seem* more real, more ordinary, and sound more conventional in their language—making them even more deceptive, ultimately. Rather than use as many direct questions as she does in the former volume, in *Made to Seem* Armantrout opts for the conversation, using a lot of "we" and "you" and "us" as a way of inclusion in a larger discussion ("Sit-Calm," "The Creation," "Incidence," "Crossing"). In each of these poems the narrative seems easy to follow, building on the conversation as if writer and reader are acquaintances or friends. Once the reader is comfortable with the poem's context, however, seemingly ordinary relationships are turned in on themselves. The reader is never completely safe, nor does meaning come as naturally as it may seem.

Armantrout's poetry helps to clarify these questions of sense-making but does not completely alienate the reader with feelings of meaninglessness, instead drawing fresher images and metaphors out of the disrupted assumptions of meaning. She argues for a kind of displacement of meaning in which the metaphor becomes more of an "oblique association" than something "natural" or "appropriate" to the context. While she may counter traditional narrative techniques in her poetry, an approach that at first seems to put off or limit the reader's understanding of the poem, she ultimately uses the poetic structure to reinvent new forms within it.

Other avant-garde poets, such as Ron Silliman, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, and Charles Bernstein, use similar inventive techniques. Armantrout's counterparts make up an innovative portion of the Language poets or Language writers. The Language movement emerged during the 1980s, inspired by reader-response and Derridean theories, with their suspicious approaches to the interpretation of texts. These poets seek intuitive associations or renovations in images rather than original innovations in ideas. Their narrative and poetic renovations lead into the Language movement's critique of traditional capitalist, or "bourgeois," culture. If Language poets can renovate the images—the structure of the text—perhaps they may transform the social matrix out of which traditional narrative assumptions and conventions arise. Rather than create new images, Armantrout and the others challenge hegemonic conceptualizations of art by breaking poetic form, utilizing parataxis and the new sentence, and commenting on the power and instability of ideological frameworks.

Language writing and Armantrout's Language poetry in particular rework the limitations of structure and convention, social positions and roles, by foregrounding devices by which these structures shape thoughts and perceptions. Her work renovates identities by reconstructing the relationship between language and the world. By calling into question the constructs of authority and familiarity, Armantrout touches upon the unreliability of the universal American narrative, and, at the same time, opens up the possibilities for new relationships to language, to poetry, and to American culture.

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Biography
Born in Vallejo, California, 13 April 1947. Attended California State University, San Diego, 1965–68; University of California, Berkeley, B.A. 1970; California State University, San Francisco, M.A. 1975; teaching assistant, California State University, San Francisco, 1972–74; Lecturer, California State University, San Diego, 1980–82, and since 1980, University of California, San Diego. Received California Arts Council fellowship, 1989; Fund for Poetry Award, 1993. Living in San Diego, California.

Poetry
Extremities, 1978
The Invention of Hunger, 1979
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Necromance, 1991
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John Ashbery 1927–

John Ashbery is undoubtedly one of the most important and influential American poets of the second half of the 20th century. Throughout a prolific career that has spanned more than five decades, Ashbery has been a consistently adventurous poetic explorer whose challenging and distinctive oeuvre has altered the definition of what poetry can be. Although he has always been a controversial figure, with the response to his work polarized between those who regard him as a preeminent poet who has done much to reinvent American poetry, and those who find his writing to be overrated, self-indulgent, and willfully difficult, few would deny his significance to American literature. Furthermore, the overriding themes of his writing—the nature of consciousness, language, and temporality; the ubiquity of randomness and indeterminacy; the instability of the self; the encroachment of the information age's proliferating media on the inner life; the impossibility of closure and fixed absolutes—reflect and express the philosophical and cultural temper of the times, making Ashbery an exemplary poet of his age.

Ashbery's poetry tends to provoke strong reactions because of its experimental handling of language and poetic form: his poems resist conventional explanation and paraphrase, refuse to present a coherent speaking self that can be identified with the poet, and lack traditional subject matter and easily grasped significance. As he points out, rather than addressing "a particular subject and treating it formally in a kind of essay," "my poetry . . . has an exploratory quality and I don't have it all mapped out before I sit down to write" (Packard, 1974). Ashbery readily admits that this quality leads his poetry in unpredictable and even bewildering directions but defends such unsettling journeys into the unknown as an integral part of his work's *raison d'être:*

> [M]y intention is to communicate and my feeling is that a poem that communicates something that's already known by the reader is not really communicating anything to him and in fact shows a lack of respect for him[.] (Packard, 1974)

Unlike many poets, Ashbery is less concerned with relating a specific event than with conveying what he calls "the experience of experience":

> [T]he particular occasion is of less interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through me. . . . I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long. (Poulin, 1981)

In Ashbery's pluralistic worldview, "things are in a continual state of motion," so any attempt to fit the overwhelming flux and variety of experience into a coherent, tidy explanation is viewed with skepticism (Stitt, 1983). Because he is much more interested in process than any finished product, the actual subject of his poems is often the "poem creating itself," the process of its own coming into being (Poulin, 1981).

Ever elusive, Ashbery's writing always seems to be on the verge of revealing something that trembles just out of reach. This uncanny ability to tantalize with possible meanings that are continually deferred or undermined is one of Ashbery's distinctive strengths. Certain stylistic features run through nearly all of his work, including the use of intentionally vague and shifting pronouns (which he has said helps "to reproduce the polyphony that goes on inside me"); the creation of indeterminate, rapidly changing, often surreal narrative situations; the collaging of various discourses, including clichés and slangy conversational speech; and a wild mix of tones and diction that can swing from the high poetic to the ridiculous in the space of a line (Stitt, 1983; Packard, 1974).

Although he is associated with New York City and the poetry of the "New York School," Ashbery grew up on a rural farm. Extremely precocious and interested in art, poetry, and music from an early age, he had a rather isolated childhood, marked by the haunting death of his nine-year-old brother when Ashbery was 13. He attended Harvard, where he began to write poetry in earnest and met the poets Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara, who would become his closest friends and artistic allies. He also steeped himself in the writers who would influence his work, such as W.H. Auden, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and Marianne Moore, as well as French poets from Stephane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud to the surrealists. After graduating, Ashbery moved to New York, where he earned an M.A. in English from Columbia University and found himself at the center of a thriving community of experimental poets and painters that included Koch, O'Hara, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and the artists Jane Freilicher and Larry Rivers. Together these poets, who would later be given the name "the New York School," rejected the closed, traditional forms of the academic poetry then dominant in favor of a more open-ended, exploratory, and playful poetics of process. Like the other New York poets, Ashbery found inspiration for this project in Abstract Expressionist painting, Surrealism, French and American avant-garde poetry, the aleatory music of John Cage, and popular culture.

In 1955 the manuscript of Ashbery's first book, *Some Trees* (1956), was chosen by Auden for the Yale Younger Poets Prize, an award that effectively launched his career. While these early poems are still relatively traditional, showing the strong influence of Stevens, Auden, and French poetry, they feature Ashbery's characteristic voice, verbal brilliance, and range of concerns. Among them are the much-anthologized and atypical poem "The Instruction Manual," a rather straightforward reverie about escaping from a dull publishing job on an imaginary trip to Guadalajara on the wings of poesy, and the title poem, a gentle yet oblique piece about covert and illicit love. Critics have recently addressed the link between the evasive reticence of these early poems and Ashbery's discomfort, as a homosexual, with self-revelation at a time of McCarthyism and repressive homophobia, an evasiveness that underlies all of his explorations of the protean, unstable nature of identity.

Ashbery also received a Fulbright scholarship in 1955 to study in France for a year, but he enjoyed living there so much that he extended his stay for most of a decade. In France he researched the eccentric French writer Raymond Roussel for a doctoral dissertation he never completed and began writing art criticism steadily, which he would continue to do for many years. In 1962 Ashbery published his controversial second volume, *The Tennis Court Oath,* a book comprised of highly experimental and radically disjunctive poems written at a time when Ashbery was "baffled as to what to do in poetry" (Packard, 1974). In works like the long collage poem "Europe," with its fragmentary phrases and

isolated words, Ashbery was self-consciously "taking poetry apart to try to understand how it works" (Osti, 1974). While some of his most ardent supporters, like Harold Bloom, view the book as a regrettable detour on Ashbery's path to greatness, the volume has had a major influence on later experimental poets, such as the Language poets, who take it to be a foundational text of postmodernist poetry and the poet's most groundbreaking book. Although Ashbery himself sees *The Tennis Court Oath* as transitional and feels less close to it than his other works, there is no doubt that the volume stands as a significant moment in his evolving aesthetic.

In *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) Ashbery began "trying to fit [poetry] back together" in arresting new formations after the rigorous "dismembering of language" in his previous book, with poems like the dense, swirling "Clepsydra" revealing his growing interest in "how time feels as it is passing" (Osti, 1974; Kostelanetz, 1981). The long poem "The Skaters" signals a departure from the austere and fractured poems of his second book, and can be seen as Ashbery's breakthrough into full stride. This expansive and exuberant masterpiece, in which the questing poet is seen paradoxically "continuing but ever beginning / My perennial voyage," is by turns conversational, lyrical, parodic, and meditative, as well as highly self-conscious about the process of its own composition (Ashbery, *The Mooring of Starting Out,* 1997).

Ashbery finally returned from France in late 1965 to live in the United States permanently and began working as an executive editor for *Art News* in New York. Following the death of his father (1964) and the shocking accidental death of his dear friend Frank O'Hara (1966), Ashbery's poetry became increasingly elegiac and concerned with temporality and transience, as exemplified in the ruminative, lyrical poems in *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), one of Ashbery's finest volumes. "In a way the passage of time is becoming more and more *the* subject of my poetry as I get older," he explained in an interview (Packard, 1974).

By the end of the 1960s Ashbery had again grown restless with his poetry and decided to break new ground with a triad of long poems in prose, the critically praised volume *Three Poems* (1972). One of Ashbery's major achievements and a favorite of his, this innovative sequence is a central expression of his philosophical and aesthetic outlook. By creating "an open field of narrative possibilities" in the poems' onrushing, serpentine language, Ashbery hit on a more inclusive, discursive, and meditative style that would become his dominant mode (Ashbery, *Three Poems,* 1972). The ecstatic response to Ashbery's next book, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), marked a crucial turning point in his career: although he had been gradually gaining acceptance after years of indifference and even hostility from reviewers dismayed by the difficulty of his work, the 1976 National Book Award, Pulitzer Prize, and National Book Critics Circle Award suddenly vaulted Ashbery into relative stardom. The book's long title poem is regarded by many to be Ashbery's masterpiece, although the poet himself has often commented disparagingly about the poem and its celebrity. A brilliant and moving contemplation of a painting by the 16th-century Italian painter Francesco Parmigianino, the poem considers the problems of rendering the contingent self in art while musing on the complexities of subjectivity, perception, time, and the vexed relationship between art and life.

After reaching this pinnacle Ashbery continued to write at the height of his powers. His equally masterful next book, *Houseboat Days* (1977), features a number of frequently anthologized poems ("Syringa," "Street Musicians," "The Other Tradition," "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name"), only to be followed by yet another bold and perhaps less successful experiment with form, the long poem "Litany" in *As We Know* (1979), which appears in two parallel columns and is "meant to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues" (Ashbery, *As You Know,* 1979). Ashbery has remained remarkably productive through his 60s and 70s, publishing six books in the 1990s alone—nearly twice as many as in any other decade of his career—each filled with provocative poems. Highlights of this later phase include the book-length poem *Flow Chart* (1991), a massive compendium of Ashberyean concerns with an autobiographical slant, and a shorter book-length poem about the fantastic, irrevocable realms of childhood, *Girls on the Run* (1999). In the latter, Ashbery once again takes a work of art as a point of departure—in this case, the strange paintings of an "outsider" artist, the recluse Henry Darger.

More than any other post–World War II poet, Ashbery has managed to bridge the "experimental" and the "mainstream." Perfecting what he has called "a kind of fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal" in "Soonest Mended," he has remained open to the impulses and techniques of the avant-garde and to the resources of poetic tradition at once. Lauded in both academic and experimental circles, he has remained free from any camp or movement. Ashbery has always stressed the importance, even the necessity, of independence for the artist, and has consistently championed those he sees as staunch individualists, outsiders, and eccentrics, such as Roussel, Stein, and artists like Fairfield Porter, Jasper Johns, and Joseph Cornell. He greatly admires—and emulates—such self-reliant figures who defiantly go their own way, avoiding dogma and programs, creating works that resist assimilation and categorization. In his own poetry Ashbery elegantly balances playfulness and pathos, mystery and revelation, randomness and meaning like no one else. With his startling inventiveness, his aesthetic and conceptual daring, and his dazzling verbal textures, Ashbery has had a tremendous impact on American poetry.

ANDREW EPSTEIN

See also New York School; Surrealism

Biography

Born in Rochester, New York, 28 July 1927. Attended Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (member of the editorial board, *Harvard Advocate*), A.B. in English 1949; Columbia University, New York, M.A. in English 1951; New York University, 1957–58; copywriter, Oxford University Press, New York, 1951–54, and McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1954–55; co-editor, *One Fourteen,* New York, 1952–53; art critic, European Edition of New York *Herald Tribune,* Paris, 1960–65, and *Art International,* Lugano, Switzerland, 1961–64; editor, *Locus Solus* magazine, Lans-en-Vercors, France, 1960–62; editor, *Art and Literature,* Paris, 1963–66; Paris correspondent, 1964–65, and executive editor, 1965–72, *Art News,* New York; Professor of English, 1974–80, and Distinguished Professor of English, 1980–90, Brooklyn College; since 1991 Professor of English, and currently Charles P. Stevenson, Jr., Professor of Languages and Literature, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; poetry editor, *Partisan Review,* New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1976–80; art

critic, *New York* magazine, 1978–80; art critic, *Newsweek*, New York, 1980–85. Received Fulbright fellowship, 1955, 1956; Poets Foundation grant, 1960, 1964; Ingram Merrill Foundation grant, 1962, 1972; Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize, 1963, 1974; Guggenheim fellowship, 1967, 1973; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1968, 1969; American Academy Award, 1969; Shelley Memorial Award, 1973; Frank O'Hara Prize, 1974; National Book Critics Circle Award, 1976; Pulitzer Prize, 1976; National Book Award, 1976; Rockefeller grant, for playwriting, 1979–80; English Speaking Union Prize, 1979; Academy of American Poets fellowship, 1982; Bard College Charles Flint Kellogg Award, 1983; Mayor's Award (New York), 1983; Bollingen Prize, 1984, 1985; Lenore Marshall Award (*Nation*), 1985; Wallace Stevens fellowship, 1985; MacArthur Foundation fellowship, 1985; MLA Commonwealth Award in Literature, 1986; Frost Medal, 1995; American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Poetry, 1997; Litt.D., Long Island University, Southampton, New York, 1979; member, American Academy, 1980; American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1983. Living in New York City and Hudson, New York.

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Clepsydra

John Ashbery's "Clepsydra" was written in 1965 and published a year later in *Rivers and Mountains*, Ashbery's third book. "Clepsydra" marks a crucial change in the direction of Ashbery's poetry in which the competing discourses of lyric poetry and verbal disjunction typical of Ashbery's second book, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), are synthesized into playful yet adamantly philosophical lines. This new style would find its densest expression in the massive prose poetry of *Three Poems* (1972) and its lightest manifestation in the more "reader-friendly" books of the 1990s, including *Can You Hear, Bird?* (1995) and *Wakefulness* (1998). "Clepsydra" has secured an oddly conditional laudatory reception. Responses range from Bloom's awed dismissal—he termed "Clepsydra" a "beautiful failure" (Bloom, 1985)—to later readings of the poem as directly influenced by and responding to Emily Dickinson.

A clepsydra is an ancient water clock used by the Greek and Chinese. John Shoptaw (1994) has pointed out that the clepsydra was used to time lawyers' arguments in court. If one imagines that lawyers' arguments are defined precisely by their provision of differing interpretations based on an identical event or series of events, one can begin to understand "Clepsydra" as a poem that is a particularly porous and debatable event unto itself. The poem invites multiple interpretations ("arguments") from multiple readers ("lawyers"), resisting the safety of easy paraphrase or discernible narrative. This conception of a poem as a field where countless interpretations can converge and play is typical of Ashbery's oeuvre; near the end of "Clepsydra" Ashbery goes so far as to say, "It is because everything is relative." The momentary appearance of truth as it manifests itself within an individual interpretation leads to the almost simultaneous slippage of truth as competing interpretations come to the foreground.

Beyond introducing philosophical themes that continue to obsess Ashbery, "Clepsydra" marks a formal shift in basic writing practice. For example, even in his "experimental" phase Ashbery's line breaks were relatively conventional, at times conforming to metrical rules, *vers libre* breath stops, or simply conceptual shifts in content. In his notoriously difficult poem "Europe" (from *The Tennis Court Oath*) Ashbery's lines break where syntactical sense demands it; its first stanza reads like the beginning of a list poem in which both ideas and objects are materialized:

> To employ her
> construction ball
> Morning fed on the
> light blue wood
> of the mouth
> cannot understand
> feels deeply.

For the first time in Ashbery's work, however, "Clepsydra" uses the poetic line to stretch, turn, and twist in a sometimes frustratingly elusive manner:

> Each moment
> Of utterance is the true one; likewise none are true,
> Only is the bounding from air to air, a serpentine
> Gesture which hides the truth behind a congruent
> Message, the way air hides the sky, is, in fact,
> Tearing it limb from limb this very moment: but
> The sky has pleaded already and this is about
> As graceful a kind of non-absence as either
> Has a right to expect. . . .

This train of thought continues for another six lines before coming to a full stop. The excerpt above is certainly a "serpentine / Gesture" to be reckoned with for its various interpretive possibilities and its aesthetics as a run-on and nearly circular, solipsistic sentence that compares in scale and expressive potential with the "Torqued Ellipses" sculptures of Richard Serra.

If one reads "Clepsydra" as a text that suggests future ambition in Ashbery's poetry, one need look no farther than the initial half-sentence in the first line, "Hasn't the sky?" "Hasn't the sky?" works as a generically epic convention: it marks the poem as commencing *in media res* and thus points back to Modernist epics like Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (which begins "And then went down to the ship"), as well as to Kenneth Koch's comic epic *Ko; or, A Season on Earth* (1959). While "Clepsydra" never reaches epic scale in terms of length, it nevertheless shows that Ashbery is conceptually on his way to writing the longer poems of his later career.

"Clepsydra" engages a strangely secular and even heretical consciousness, husbanding its own nonsense into a mimetic reflection of a preconscious *and* post-apocalyptic physical universe. In marked contrast to the Book of Genesis' exegesis on the Word of God and its role in creation, Ashbery writes,

> But there was no statement
> At the beginning. There was only a breathless waste,
> A dumb cry shaping everything in projected
> After-effects orphaned by playing the part intended for
> them,
> Though one must not forget that the nature of this
> Emptiness, these previsions,
> Was that it could only happen here, on this page held
> Too close to be legible, sprouting erasures, except that they
> Ended everything in the transparent sphere of what was
> Intended only a moment ago, spiraling further out, its
> Gesture finally dissolving in the weather.

Ashbery's debt to Blake is apparent here in that rationality—an intellectual intervention into "this / Emptiness"—is deemed an annihilative force. Indeed, Blake's idealized non-binary mythic worlds are alluded to in later lines when Ashbery refers coyly to a "sphere of pure wisdom and / Entertainment" that "we shall never see." Close readings are disappearing acts, "this page held / Too close to be legible." The moment one interrogates the page, it dies in a sense, "spiraling further out, its / Gesture finally dissolving in the weather." One can see why Harold Bloom (1985) writes that "'Clepsydra' gives the uncanny effect of being a poem that neither wants nor needs readers."

For all its seriousness, however, "Clepsydra" remains a poem of pleasure, one that invites the reader to dally, loll, and play on the margins of sense and rationality: "He was out of it of course for having lain happily awake / On the tepid fringes of that field or whatever." Joining Ashbery on the field of "Clepsydra" is certainly a worthwhile if often perplexing game.

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Flow Chart

Preeminent literary critics such as Harold Bloom have long seen John Ashbery "joining that American sequence that includes Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, and Hart Crane." Perhaps more than any of his other work, the long-term evaluation of his magnum opus *Flow Chart* (1991), which fellow poets such as Alfred Corn deem his "most important book," will determine whether he fulfills his christening as the poet of the age.

Weighing in at 216 pages, *Flow Chart* is Ashbery's longest book-length poem and is generally considered to be his most challenging work since *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). It remains arguably the grandest exercise of his highly original style. More so than his other book-length poems, such as *Three Poems* (1972) and *Girls on the Run* (1999), *Flow Chart*'s aspirations are more distinctly traceable to its forerunners, especially Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805) and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Typically, Ashbery only briefly hints at such lofty intentions before quickly both confusing and defusing them by a sudden shift in register:

> The words, distant now, and mitred, glint. Yet not one
> Ever escapes the forest of agony and pleasure that keeps
> them
> In a solution that has become permanent through inertia.
> The force
> Of meaning never extrudes. And the insects,
> Of course, don't mind.

The original idea for the book came from Ashbery's friend Trevor Winkfield, who proposed Ashbery write a 100-page poem about his mother not long after she died in 1987. While the poem that became *Flow Chart* is not, ultimately, "about" Ashbery's mother, it was produced within Winkfield's proposed constraints: an even 100-page single-spaced typewritten manuscript was translated into a 216-page bound text. Winkfield's inspiration is somewhat commemorated by the flow chart-like design he created for the cover of the original edition.

Ashbery began composing the poem on 8 December 1987, with plans to finish the 100th page on 28 July 1988, his 61st birthday. Although not part of the published version, date tags on the source manuscript trace the poet's progress for "future scholars to come," as Ashbery himself has said. Ashbery followed this same diary format while creating several of his earlier long poems. It is therefore not difficult to recognize any of these poems' kinship with Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1922–32; *Remembrance of Things Past*), a text to which Ashbery has openly admitted turning for inspiration over the years. He has described *Flow Chart* as

> a kind of continuum, a diary, even though it's not in the form of a diary. It's the result of what I had to say on certain days over a period of six months, during the course of thinking about my past, the weather outside. I free-associate and come up with all kinds of extra material that doesn't belong—but does. (Dinitia Smith, "Poem Alone," *New York* [20 May 1991])

Despite what the circumstances of its composition might lead one to believe, *Flow Chart* is not autobiographical, at least not in the traditional sense. As much as the poem suggests a central consciousness, it also constantly switches—or suddenly abandons—the governing pronoun without notice. Proper names are used once and then never again. Yet traditional sentence structure is carefully, even eloquently, maintained. This technique (if it can be called conscious technique) and the effect it produces are uniquely Ashbery's.

On the other hand, the poem is a kind of celebration of the autobiographical act, an almost physical representation of the effects of time on recorded detail. The poem focuses on everything in general and nothing—no single person's autobiography—in particular. Helen Vendler tried to describe the poem as follows:

> [*Flow Chart* is] a two-hundred-and-fifteen-page lyric; a diary; a monitor screen registering a moving EEG; a thousand and one nights; Penelope's web unraveling; views from Argus' hundred eyes; a book of riddles; a ham-radio station; an old trunk full of memories; a rubbish dump; a Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations;* a Last Folio; a vaudeville act. . . . It makes Ashbery's past work (except for those poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* . . .) seem serenely classical, well ordered, pure, shapely, and above all, *short*. (Vendler, 1992)

Ashbery described another of his better-known long poems, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1975), a poem to which *Flow Chart* bears many similarities, as "a kind of history of its own coming into being." *Flow Chart* also contains passages that say as much:

> I suppose it does congeal slowly, like those footprints a
> primate
> made one morning zillions of years ago, and that says
> *something* about spontaneity
> as well as one's right to privacy.

Such fluctuation in register and ingenuousness is typical of an Ashbery poem. *Flow Chart* constantly makes wild moves between pathos and bathos:

> In the meantime, look sharp, and sharply at
> What is around you; there is
> Always the possibility something may come of something,
> and that is our
> Fondest wish though it says here I'm not supposed to say
> so, not now, not
> In this place of wood and sunlight, this stable or retiring
> room or whatever you
> Want to call it.
>
> Excuse me while I fart. There, that's better. I actually feel
> relieved.

The poem is written in free verse, with line structure governed solely by the width of the source manuscript page. The edition of the poem does not recreate the appearance of the source manu-

script, instead wrapping longer lines beneath themselves in the style of poet C.K. Williams. There is a notable exception to the poem's free verse in its elaborate near-conclusion: a double sestina that borrows its end-words from Swinburne's sestina "The Complaint of Lisa." While startling to the uninitiated, such fantastic parlor games are typical of Ashbery's work.

Many critics have attempted to ease readers' discomfort with Ashbery's work by encouraging them to read it through the lens of modern art. Ashbery himself has said of his style, "I attempt to use words abstractly, as an artist uses paint." The experience of reading *Flow Chart* is very much akin to the experience of regarding one of the massive abstract canvases of Ashbery's contemporary New York School painter friends. As with standing in front of a wall-sized Jackson Pollock canvas, to make any attempt at assembling the random into the singularly representational is to be quickly frustrated and defeated.

In a sense the reader has to make the Zen-like transformation into "being" Ashbery. The critic Helen Vendler has written that the only way she can read Ashbery is

> by entering some bizarrely tuned pitch inside myself ... [where I can] find myself on Ashbery's wavelength, where everything at the symbolic level makes sense. The irritating (and seductive) thing about this tuning in is that it can't be willed: I can't make it happen when I am tired or impatient. But when the frequencies meet, the effect on me is Ashbery's alone, and it is the form of trance. (Vendler, 1992)

Flow Chart, in both scope and length, proves the ultimate test.

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Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror

Published in the middle of Ashbery's career, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1975) has sparked more critical interest than any of his other poems. There are good reasons for its popularity: the poem itself is a stunning meditation on the nature of identity and its relationship to experience or perception, death, and the passage of time. It is also the most plainly discursive of Ashbery's major works. Before publication the poem was heavily revised—something of an anomaly for Ashbery—and although "Self-Portrait" is by no means simple, its solemnity makes it a bit more approachable than the wider-ranging syntactical and structural play that is often the hallmark of his work.

In its opening line "Self-Portrait" refers to Francesco Parmigianino, a Mannerist painter who copied his reflection in a convex mirror onto a half-sphere of wood. A response to this painting, the six sections of the poem include: a meditation on the values implicit in the painting's composition; a reflection on the relationship between the self and the phenomenal world; an examination of time and possibility; a reassessment of the painting's impact on the observer; a discussion of the influence of the immediate world on the act of reflection; and a consideration of change and death that regards the difficult nature of love, objects to mimetic art, and underscores the speaker's immersion in time's progress.

Parmigianino's almost "angelic" face occupies the center of the painting, showing "tenderness, amusement and regret." The problem it presents, as the poem's opening lines demonstrate, is that the artist is "sequestered." The convex mirror chooses to reflect "only what he saw," which is "glazed" and "embalmed." In the expression on Parmigianino's face "the soul establishes itself," but because "the distance increases / Significantly" on the surface of the mirror, between the artist and the world, "the soul is a captive" that longs "to be free." Before the first section of the poem concludes, the speaker asserts that "the soul is not a soul": it holds "no secret, is small, and it fits / Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention." This "moment of attention"—as far as art is concerned—is represented in Parmigianino's work by the hand that holds the brush, a hand that, because of the mirror's distortions, is larger in the painting than is the face above it. While the mirrored face invites and rejects the soul's existence, the hand insists that "there are no words for the surface," no words "to say what really is." Despite what one might long for, appearances *are* reality, what the end of section one calls a "visible core." As a consequence, there is "no way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience."

The middle sections of "Self-Portrait" probe this problem and ultimately attempt to find a solution by joining the self to its ongoing experience. The second section folds the past into the present, so that memory becomes part of the "magma of interiors" that shapes the self, the "dreaming model," and the third section of the poem considers the future, the horizon of possibilities "sweeping out from us." The "room" that the self inhabits contains this "flow like an hourglass"; in passing through time and trying to find significance in events "something like living occurs, a movement / Out of the dream into its codification." Section four tells the reader that the effort to discover a unitary meaning, the "consonance of the high Renaissance," is as impossible as it might be to recognize an angel who "looks like everything / We have forgotten." There must be another way to look at life, the fifth section suggests—life as it happens, immediate and resistant to code, the landscape "alive with filiations, shuttlings," the "backing of the looking glass." This other life is grounds for "a new preciosity," a challenger pounding on the gates of an amazed Castle," banging at the door of the "sequestered self," of the classical artist's dream of "consonance." For some readers the optimism expressed here will carry through to the poem's conclusion. Parmigianino's argument has grown "stale," and "another life"—a compound of memory, self, appearances, and immediacy—can supplant the outmoded desire for transcendence, the secret soul,

and the false immortality promised by art. Rejecting the singular for the plural, the poem suggests that

> It,
> Not we, are the change; that we are in fact it
> If we could get back to it.

The last section of "Self-Portrait"—nearly half of the entire poem—demands a careful reading, however, because it responds to the "new preciosity" while it continues to consider the values represented in the convex mirror.

The sixth section of "Self-Portrait" begins by returning to Parmigianino's face, attention "locking into place" like death. Mirrors are often problematic in Ashbery's work: "The Skaters" hopes there is time

> . . . to utterly destroy
> That too-familiar image
> Lurking in the glass
> Each morning, at the edge of the mirror

and "Fragment" calls the mirror a "stiff enclave" that contains "so much authority / And intelligence in such a miserable result." "Self-Portrait" holds forth against the ominous suggestions of limitation and mortality that mirrors represent but, like "another life," it cannot hold forth forever. The act of attention, the process involved in the creation of art, cannot be endless. The products of art, Parmigianino's portrait and the poem itself, might feed the desire for permanence, for transcendent meaning and immortality, but they are delimited by time. Love, a cousin to high art and the desires it represents, "once / Tipped the scales but now is shadowed and invisible." It is "around somewhere," but "cannot be sandwiched / Between two adjacent moments," leaving a vague

> . . . sense of something that can never be known
> Even though it seems likely that each of us
> Knows what it is.

A large part of the sixth section carries on almost cheerfully in the face of finality, praising the "never-to-be-defined daytime," the "present we are always escaping from / And falling back into," but "*This* thing, the mute, undivided present," cannot fairly compete with the notion of eternity. One might be happy understanding that "all time / Reduces to no special time," the poem suggests, if one did not also understand that "no special time" must inevitably end. Consciousness of death creates a distance in the midst of life, an "otherness" that is "all there is to look at / In the mirror." These conclusions darken the last pages of "Self-Portrait." The landscape that earlier seemed so promising, the "backing of the looking glass," becomes at last "the gibbous / Mirrored eye of an insect." At the end of the poem, whether looking to the self or toward the world, the speaker—and the reader—are caught in a reflection:

> And each part of the whole falls off
> And cannot know it knew, except
> Here and there, in cold pockets
> Of remembrance, whispers out of time.

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The Tennis Court Oath

"The Tennis Court Oath" is the title poem of John Ashbery's book by the same name published in 1962. The poem consists of 49 lines of free verse divided into six stanzas of varying length. The title of the work suggests two possible sources for its inspiration: one an historical event, and the other a famous work of art. However, only one of these is actually relevant to the poem. Historically, The Tennis Court Oath was a key episode of the French Revolution. It earned its name when a crowd of commoners known as the "Third Estate," having been locked out of a meeting of the Estates General, gathered in solidarity on a nearby tennis court and vowed to remain there united in protest until the Constitution was reformed with certain concessions granted to them. Ashbery's poem neither retells nor refers to this incident. Second, the title is that of a well-known painting by the French Neoclassicist Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) in which the historical protest is depicted. In David's painting, the oath-takers of the Third Estate are portrayed as patriots and heroes of the Revolution. What Ashbery found to be most intriguing about David's painting is that it was never completed, and this notion of "incompleteness" is central to his poem. Ashbery was fascinated by the unfinished work's combination of an ironic expression of heroism with a lack of completeness. He saw this combination as being congruous to the methods employed and the themes expressed in his poem, in which the first-person speaker remains permanently "incomplete."

The key to understanding how "The Tennis Court Oath" works is the poem's first line. The phrase "What had you been thinking

about" is a question that cannot be answered with any real satisfaction because thoughts are internal events unique to the person who generates them. Thoughts cannot be transferred completely intact from the mind of one person to another, thus "thinking" itself remains forever incomplete. And yet Ashbery's opening line suggests a way for the reader to comprehend the many incomplete sentences that arise and disappear at random throughout the piece. After encountering the opening line, the reader will understand that one is expected to give oneself over entirely to the poem's non sequiturs, and allow meaning itself to be constructed from their juxtaposition with one's own thoughts. Thus, the overall meaning of the poem will differ from reader to reader, and from time to time, according to each individual's or time period's unique response to it.

To enhance this effect, the poet has purposely left the lines in the poem unpunctuated, so that the reader must approach each one with some confusion before deciding for himself how to interpret its meaning. Ashbery's intention is to use language in its most minimal configuration, stripped of all the trappings and sign posts designed to lead one through a written work so that meaning can be precisely conveyed. His concern is not with the precise conveyance of meaning, but rather with the true nature of thought. It is "thinking" itself Ashbery wishes to investigate, thus his poem proceeds accordingly as a stream of consciousness through which flow fragments of only partially comprehensible incidents, images, and assertions. A bit like Pound's notion of the "Vortex," the poem may be thought of as a catalyst for the reader's intellectual response to it. However, Ashbery is in no way a Modernist in sensibility, but rather a Postmodernist whose goal lies in the creation of a kind of interactive text that, by virtue of its incompleteness, is resistant to stability, classification, and finitude.

What is discernibly and undeniably concrete in the poem are its many nightmarish images. The first stanza contains the lines "the face studiously bloodied," "I go on loving you like water but," and "there is a terrible breath in the way all of this." There is a sense of disappointment: "You were not elected president, yet won the race," and a general foreboding: "I worry." In subsequent stanzas, the poem gathers disorienting momentum. Like a dream encountered *in medias res*, it vacillates quickly between the grotesque and the sublime. The predominant motifs of danger and expedition are put through many variations. In the second stanza a "water beetle head" that "reflects all" seems to provide the most effective and appropriate representation for the poem's refracted and diffused imagery, while the implications of travel appear to waver between the mundane in the line "I thought going down to mail this" and the exotic with "are incomparable the lovely tent / mystery you don't want surrounded the real / you dance." Stanza three builds on this imperfect exoticism as a nameless "mulatress" approaches but never reaches "[some]one in yon house" of stanza four. Stanza five exhibits a dark psychological inwardness underlying scenes of some violent import: "blood," "The doctor," "sharp edge," and "cry" are interposed by the insinuative "reading it carelessly as if to tell you your fears were justified." In the final stanza, one senses some relief in the line "there was no turning back but the end was in sight," before the poem concludes abruptly and ambiguously.

Ashbery was living in Paris at the time the poem was written. While there, he was introduced to a variety of the new traditions of linguistic experimentation then surfacing in French poetry, as well as to the generally anti-hermeneutic outlook that dominated the 1960s. In many ways, "The Tennis Court Oath" is illustrative of the techniques and philosophies to which Ashbery had been newly exposed. The poem is explosively dadaistic in form; radically "open" and disjunctive. Words are spattered onto the page in a style full of wild leaps, discontinuities, and fragments. A general sense of chaos predominates. Ashbery has described this "cut-up" strategy as a way of "taking poetry apart to try to understand how it works." He was experimenting with poetry's limits, seeing to what degree the elements of a poem could appear unrelated and yet have some mysterious poetic and imaginative connection for the mind to resolve.

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Asian American Poetry

In the preface to their groundbreaking collection *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong note that "Asian Americans are not one people but several—Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans." The "Asian-American sensibility" that the volume seeks to represent depends on being "American born and raised"; it features writers who, the editors claim, "got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering whined, shouted, or screamed 'aiiieeeee!'" Taking aim at the stereotype of Asian-Americans as the model minority, the editors lament that "seven generations of suppression under legislative racism and euphemized white racist love have left today's Asian Americans in a state of self-contempt, self-rejection, and disintegration." As of 1974, they maintain, fewer than "ten works of fiction and poetry have been published by American-born Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino writers," not because "in six generations of Asian Americans there was no impulse to literary or artistic self-expression" but because mainstream American publishers were only interested in publishing works written by Asian-Americans that were "*actively inoffensive* to white sensibilities."

Aiiieeeee! was intended to counter the accepted wisdom that a literature that could be called "Asian-American" simply did not exist. "My writer's education owes a big debt to this first *Aiiieeeee!*" writes the Filipino-American novelist and poet Jessica Hagedorn:

> The energy and interest sparked by *Aiiieeeee!* in the Seventies was essential to Asian American writers because it gave us visibility and credibility as creators of our own specific literature. We could not be ignored; suddenly, we were no longer silent. Like other writers of color in America, we were beginning to challenge the long-cherished concepts of a xenophobic literary canon dominated by white heterosexual males. Obviously, there was room for more than one voice and one vision in this ever-expanding arena.

In 1990, the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* produced a sequel titled *The Big Aiiieeeee!* which dropped the requirement of birth on U.S. soil but restricted itself to Chinese-American and Japanese-American literature. In narrowing its focus, *The Big Aiiieeeee!* contributed to the perception that Asian-American literature essentially consists of literature by Chinese- and Japanese-Americans, with sporadic contributions by writers of Southeast Asian and Asian-Indian descent.

By the end of the 20th century, however, critics working in the field of Asian-American literature preferred to include under the rubric of "Asian-American literature" texts written by people of Asian descent who were either born in or migrated to North America. Although the term "Asian-American" had been invented for the purpose of promoting political solidarity among Americans of Asian descent, the idea of a unifying "Asian-American" sensibility that depends on being born in North America has come to seem stifling, particularly after the sharp increase in Asian immigration that followed the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished the quotas that favored immigrants from northern European countries. By century's end, the label "Asian-American" had been broadened to include native and naturalized Americans of not only Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino but also Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Indian, Indonesian, Korean, Laotian, Nepalese, Thai, and Vietnamese descent. This new diversity was not represented, however, in the Asian-American literary canon, which continued to be dominated by Chinese- and Japanese-American authors, with increasing contributions from writers of Korean, Filipino, and South Asian descent.

The original *Aiiieeeee!* anthology contained fiction and drama but no poetry, and in general Asian-American poetry has lagged behind the other genres in achieving prominence on the literary landscape. *The Big Aiiieeeee!* however, brought attention to a recently recovered tradition of Chinese-American poetry, written by immigrants arriving in the San Francisco Bay Area during the first two decades of the century. During this period, poetry appeared in two daily newspapers written in Cantonese and published in San Francisco's Chinatown: the *Chung Sai Yat Po,* which was established in 1900 and began issuing a daily literary supplement in 1908, and the *Sai Gat Yat Po,* which was established in 1909. Chinatown had a number of literary societies that sponsored poetry competitions, and in 1911 the prominent bookseller Tai Quong Company published an anthology of 808 vernacular poems titled *Jinshan ge ji* ("Songs of Gold Mountain," after the popular name given to the United States by Chinese sojourners); a second volume, published in 1915, collected an additional 832 folk rhymes. Together, these poems present a rich account of the experience of early Chinese immigrants in the United States; many express the loneliness, despair, and frustration of discovering that American practices do not always live up to American ideals: "So, liberty is your national principle," writes one of these anonymous poets. "Why do you practice autocracy? / You don't uphold justice, you Americans, / You detain me in prison, guard me closely. . . . When can I get out of this prison and free my mind?" An additional set of 135 poems, which had been scribbled in Cantonese on the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station by those detained there, were preserved when two detainees copied them down and brought them to San Francisco.

The only Chinese-American poet included in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* is Wing Tek Lum, who was born and raised in Honolulu. His first volume of poetry, *Expounding the Doubtful Points* (1987), was awarded the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award. It contains poignant lyrics about family life, describing the poet's difficult relationship with his father ("a gruff old fut"), who died of cancer, and—in sharp contrast to the tendentious mother-son relationships that are found in many works by male Asian-American writers—his more tender relationship with his mother, who died of cancer when he was 16. Other poems treat sociopolitical issues, such as the melting pot, pluralism, and Eurocentrism, while still others, such as "To Li Po," meditate on the practice of poetry. Another American Book Award winner, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, also cites Li Po as a part of her "poetic tradition"; as befits a writer who was born in Beijing of Chinese and Dutch parents and raised in Massachusetts, she includes among her other influences Sappho, Dante, Yeats, Vallejo, Rilke, Stein, Whitman, Dickinson, Pound, and Ashbery as well as Tu Fu and Wang Wei.

Lum and Berssenbrugge, like most Chinese-American poets, are interested in finding ways to make use of traditional Chinese poetics and the long history of Chinese poetry within the context of modern poetry written in English. Other Chinese-American poets with similar interests include Arthur Sze, who studied Chinese literature at the University of California, Berkeley; Li-Young Lee, who describes his poetry as a process of "serious and passionate apprenticeship, which involves a strange combination of awe and argument, with the Masters"; and Carolyn Lau, who invokes Chinese philosophy in poems such as "A Footnote to a Dispute among Confucius's Disciples." Paradoxically, such interests put these poets squarely within a central tradition of American Modernist poetry: Conrad Aiken, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and many other "American" poets of the early 20th century sought inspiration by turning to China.

Other poets, however, view traditional Chinese culture with more ambivalence. In "My Father's Martial Art," Stephen Liu portrays traditional Chinese culture as an anachronism in modern America. The narrator of Marilyn Chin's "We Are Americans Now, We Live in the Tundra" sings "a blues song" to China and bids "farewell" to her "ancestors / Hirsute Taoists, failed scholars." Moreover, women poets such as Chin, Diana Chang, Genny Lim, Diane Mark, Nellie Wong, and Merle Woo often fault traditional Chinese culture for its misogyny and discover that finding a poetic voice is often linked to rebellion against patriarchal traditions personified in the figure of the father and implicit in the communal life of Chinatown.

The typical American Chinatown began as a segregated ghetto for immigrants who were still designated "aliens ineligible to citizenship" under the provisions of the Nationality Act of 1870, so that in the early years of the 20th century they were largely communities of immigrant bachelors. Planning merely to sojourn in the United States in order to earn money, many early immigrants found it too expensive to bring their wives with them, and in 1870 the ratio of Chinese men to women in the United States was 14 to 1. This gender imbalance was frozen into place by the provisions of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited further immigration from China, and by the fact that Chinese men were forbidden by U.S. law to marry white women. Chinatown thus becomes a symbol in Chinese-American writing for traditional Chinese values, including patriarchy, and for U.S. racial oppression; and for many Chinese-American poets, particularly those who are the children of pre–World War II immigrants, it is often Chinatown that is their primary link to Chinese tradition.

Finding themselves caught between cultures, many Chinese-American poets lace their work with history and politics. A powerful example is Alan Lau's "Water that Springs from a Rock," which merges the lyrical and the historiographic as it recounts the massacre of Chinese workers for the Union Pacific Railroad in Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885. Genny Lim, Nellie Wong, and Merle Woo write about the ways in which Chinese women have been objectified by white male culture, while poems such as Arthur Sze's "Listening to a Broken Radio" and John Yau's "Rumors" question the value of the American dream. A humorous but apt dramatization of the project of Chinese-American poetry can be found in the meal prepared by the narrator of Wing Tek Lum's "T-Bone Steak":

> No, it was not
> Chinese, much less
> American, that pink piece
> sitting in my rice bowl. It was,
> simply, how our family
> ate, and I
> for one am grateful for
> the difference.

Twentieth-century Chinese-American poetry makes use of a set of recurrent motifs: traditional Chinese culture, the idea of the United States as the "Gold Mountain," working on the railroads, the bachelor culture of Chinatown, the feminization of Chinese culture, and racial discrimination. In contrast, the history of 20th-century Japanese-American poetry centers on a single historical moment: World War II and its immediate aftermath. Japanese-American poetry written in English during the 20th century was produced almost exclusively by nisei (second-generation) and sansei (third-generation) authors. The issei, first-generation immigrants who came to the United States mainland and to Hawaii between 1885 and 1924, did write poetry that was published in Japanese-language newspapers on the West Coast and in Hawaii, usually in haiku or in other traditional Japanese poetic forms. One issei poet, Bunichi Kagawa, not only published in Japanese-language newspapers but also wrote poems in English, which were collected in the volume *Hidden Flame* (1930). From the 1920s on, nisei writers began publishing in the English-language sections of Japanese-American newspapers, and for the most part their poetry is strongly influenced by Western literary conventions. Chiye Mori was one of the first poets to explore the political dimension of nisei identity: her poem "Japanese American" (1932) likens the nisei to "clay pigeons traveling swiftly and aimlessly / On the electric wire of international hate / Helpless targets in the shooting gallery of political discord."

The bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the subsequent internment of 110,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans produced feelings of bewilderment and betrayal among many of the nisei, whose rights as U.S. citizens were completely ignored by the U.S. government. Some, such as the members of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), sought to prove their loyalty as Americans by supporting the U.S. government's wartime policies toward American Japanese, while others remained bitterly disillusioned, particularly after the government sought to recruit nisei volunteers into the armed forces in 1942. The English-language magazines that were produced in three of the internment camps—*Trek* (Topaz, Utah), *Tulean Dispatch* (Tule Lake, California), and *The Pen* (Rowher, Arkansas)—reflect the struggle between these perspectives, although critical points of view were blunted by government censorship. The wartime poetry of Toyo Suryemoto uses a facade of natural metaphors to convey the bitterness and despair brought about by internment.

This split perspective about the necessity of internment continues in Japanese-American writing after the war. In prose, it is reflected in the gap between the conciliatory rhetoric of Monica Sone's autobiography *Nisei Daughter* (1953) and John Okada's bitterly ambivalent novel *No-No Boy* (1957), which details the postwar struggles of a former internee who was imprisoned after refusing to swear loyalty to the U.S. government while in camp. Issei poets such as Shumpa Kiuchi and Shusei Matsui wrote poems that hearkened back to heroic traditions in Asian literature, while many nisei authors, writing in the JACL's national paper, *Pacific Citizen,* and in such Japanese-American newspapers as *Rafu*

Shimpo (Los Angeles) and *Hokubei Mainichi* (San Francisco), devoted themselves to forgetting the miseries of internment and reintegrating themselves into U.S. culture. Hisaye Yamamoto's celebrated story "Seventeen Syllables" charts the gap that grows between a young and increasingly Americanized nisei woman and her mother; the daughter, Rosie, pretends to appreciate the haiku that her mother has just composed because she is ashamed to reveal just how shaky her command of Japanese really is.

The poet Mitsuye Yamada, born in Japan and therefore an issei but raised among nisei in the United States, cuts across the grain of these generalizations. Her first collection, *Camp Notes* (1976), brings together pieces written during and after her internment at Minidoka and poems written during the 1970s. Written with an ironic detachment and an eye for poignant detail, her poems adopt the anti-racist and anti-patriarchal attitudes that are usually found in sansei writing about the war. Writing in the aftermath of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and the Vietnam War, sansei poets such as Lawson Fusao Inada and Janice Mirikitani sought to make their poetry a vehicle for the reconstruction of Japanese-American identity. In the introduction to his second volume of poetry, *Legends of Camp* (1993), Inada writes, "More and more, artist and audience are becoming one—for the greater cause of community and mutuality . . . I began functioning as a *community* poet—with new people, places, and publications to work with." Sharing Inada's sense of political commitment, Mirikitani adds a strain of self-reflectiveness, meditating occasionally on the limits of what poetry and thought can accomplish. After listening to the experiences of a Vietnam veteran, the speaker of "Jungle Rot and Open Arms" asks,

> so where is my
> *political education?* my
> *rhetorical answers* to everything? my
> *theory into practice?* my
> *intensification of life in art?*

Some sansei writers have sought to ground their poetry in a new regionalism: Juliet Kono's collection *Hilo Rains* (1988) explores the ways in which three generations of her family have been shaped by the land of Hawaii, while Garrett Kaoru Hongo writes about Hawaii and other communities where Asian-Americans live, seeking to draw connections across regional and ethnic boundaries.

Cathy Song is another poet whose work crosses ethnic boundaries. Born in Honolulu to a Chinese mother and a Korean father, Song's poetry is deeply rooted in both the Hawaiian landscape and her dual Asian heritage. Her first collection, *Picture Bride* (1983), draws inspiration from Korean and Chinese traditions, even as it uses memories and images drawn from family life to explore the ways in which these traditions are restrictive, particularly for women. Myung Mi Kim, a Korean who came to the United States at the age of nine, found herself influenced by what is perhaps the best-known Korean-American text in academic circles, Theresa Cha's formally experimental *Dictée* (1982), which explores the aftereffects of the Japanese colonization of Korea while taking aim at U.S. national narratives of assimilation. Kim's first collection, *Under Flag* (1991), portrays the fragmentation of Korean-American subjectivities as a result of the loss of language and homeland and the corrosiveness of U.S. racism. Kim has characterized her use of language as "an English that behaves like Korean, an English shaped by a Korean," a kind of third language "beyond what is systematically Korean and English." The question of whether Korean immigrants should produce literature written in Korean or English is debated among Korean-American intellectuals. The poet Ch'oe Yun-hong has suggested that Koreans' lack of interest in the problems of Korean-Americans has discouraged the production of American poetry written in Korean, and scholars of Korean literature have suggested that Korean-American literature should distinguish itself by turning to English and focusing on immigrant life rather than memories of Korea. Ch'oe suggests that the harshness of life for many Korean-Americans has fueled a "desire for poetry," but at the end of the 20th century, Korean-American poetry remains an underdeveloped segment of Asian-American poetry.

Another as yet underdeveloped but increasingly vibrant area is Filipino-American poetry. Because the majority of Filipino immigrants have seemed to take pride in their Americanization, Filipinos have been regarded as an "invisible minority," with many Americans unaware of the existence of a Philippine-American War in 1899. One of the earliest Filipino-American poets to publish in the United States was José García Villa, who lived the bohemian life in Greenwich Village and counted among his friends W.H. Auden, E.E. Cummings, and Edith Sitwell. In addition to short stories, Villa wrote poetry that was strongly influenced by the intellectual climate of Modernism. His contemporary Carlos Bulosan is perhaps best known for his autobiography *America Is in the Heart* (1946), but he also wrote poems that continued his exploration of what it means to be an outsider in U.S. culture while still believing in the nation's ideals. In the aftermath of the 1960s, Filipino-American poets began to explore the contours of U.S. racial discrimination. Serafin Syquia wrote paeans to solidarity among U.S. ethnic minorities in poems such as "i can relate to tonto" (1972), while Sam Tagatac's "A Chance Meeting between Huts" (1975) focused on an "act / of recognition" between two Asian-Americans who learn to see outside of U.S. stereotypes. In "Rapping with One Million Carabaos in the Dark" (1974), Alfred Robles tells his fellow Filipino-Americans to "put down your white mind / . . . / & burn up all that white shit / that's keeping your people down." The success of Jessica Hagedorn's novel *Dogeaters* (1990) sparked new interest in Filipino-American literature and was followed by the publication in 1996 of two anthologies—*Returning a Borrowed Tongue: An Anthology of Contemporary Filipino Poetry in English* (edited by Nick Carbó) and *Flippin': Filipinos on America* (edited by Luis H. Francia and Eric Gamalinda)—that contain a richly diverse set of Filipino and Filipino-American poets.

Poetry by Americans of South Asian descent was also a growing field at the end of the 20th century despite the fact that South Asians are still being omitted from mainstream collections, such as Shawn Wong's *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology* (1996). In his first volume of poetry, *The Loss of India* (1964), Zulfikar Ghose, born in prepartition India and Pakistan, explores the dislocation that occurs when a South Asian chooses to write in English and to live in the West. Writing in both English and Kannada, the Indian-born poet and translator A.K. Ramanujan explores the dynamics of the Hindu family, weaving together past and present, India and Chicago, his adopted home. The list of significant South Asian poets working in North America includes two Canadians of Sri Lankan descent, Rienzi Crusz and Michael Ondaatje, the latter best known for his Booker Prize–

winning novel *The English Patient* (1992); Agha Shahid Ali, whose 1979 volume *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* invokes a long tradition of Urdu poetry; and Meena Alexander, who was born in India and raised in the Sudan before settling permanently in New York. To the exploration of postcolonial identity that marks the work of all the South Asian writers mentioned here, Alexander adds a commitment to feminist aesthetics and politics. In an essay titled "Is There an Asian American Aesthetics?" Alexander maintains that art "is always political, even if it is mostly abstract, even if it is a simple visual image of a leaf falling from a tree."

The idea that art and politics are inextricably connected has become a staple of Asian-American poetry, particularly as new voices emerge from the shadows of cultural marginalization. Perhaps the dramatic monologues written by Ai, the daughter of a Japanese father and a mother who is a mixture of black, Choctaw, and Irish, might serve as an emblem for 20th-century Asian-American poetry. "It's time to cross the border / and cut your throat with two knives," says a character in Ai's *Killing Floor* (1979). Whether or not their ethnic background is mixed like Ai's, Asian-American poets recognize that they live in a state of cultural hybridity, caught between cultures. In their poetry, hybridity is portrayed more often than not as a state of violence. For these writers, the beauty of poetry is its ability to transform violence into art and thus despair into hope.

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W.H. Auden 1907–73

Virtually the whole of W.H. Auden's achievement in poetry, drama, opera libretti, and critical prose may be said to be governed by two convictions: first, that the poet must not lie; second, that although individuals never cease to be responsible for the suffering of others, happiness must balance guilt. Although widely regarded as one of the 20th century's dominant poetic figures, Auden has seemed to some frustratingly protean, his formal versatility and willingness to rethink his opinions seeming to deprive his corpus of the coherence usually found in major writers. It has become clear with time, however, that Auden's work is held together by a number of enduring concerns, among which none are more central than poetic truthfulness and human responsibility.

Auden's most pointed statement on poetic honesty appears in his foreword to the *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957* (1966), in which he explains that he omitted certain poems because "they were dishonest, or bad-mannered, or boring." A dishonest poem, he writes, is "one which expresses, no matter how well, feelings or beliefs which its author never felt or entertained." As an example, he cites the closing lines of "Spain" (1937): "History to the defeated / may say alas but cannot help nor pardon." It would have been bad enough, he observes, if he "had ever held this wicked doctrine, but that [he] should have stated it simply because it sounded . . . rhetorically effective is quite inexcusable." In fashioning the 1966 collection, he omitted not only "Spain" but also several other of his most famous poems, including "September 1, 1939." Both remain absent from the *Collected Poems* (1976), whose editor, Edward Mendelson, strove to honor Auden's own intentions in assembling the volume.

The 1966 collection did not mark Auden's first intervention in the shaping of his canon or his first revulsion from insincerity, however. In earlier collections (1945 and 1950), he had already rewritten or excluded poems he no longer felt to be true to the beliefs that had generated them. He also articulated this concern for honesty within such lyrics as "Mundus et Infans" (1942), in which he writes of "what only the / Greatest of saints become—someone who does not lie." In 1939 he had discovered, in concluding an address to the Foreign Correspondents' Dinner Forum in New York, that he "could make a fighting demagogic speech and have the audience roaring." He later described this feeling as

degrading as well as exciting ("I felt just covered with dirt afterwards") and vowed never again to speak at a political meeting. That Auden was one of the most scrupulous of writers is not to be doubted, and yet—one of the great ironies of his career—he found his integrity questioned far more frequently than most of his fellows. The facility with which he ranged through voices and positions in his early poetry led some critics to mistake experiment for expediency; in later years, his fidelity to his own intellectual development (especially as realized in the revisions) invited the mistrust of those who believed that a work's first incarnation is its truest.

Chronicles of literary history routinely describe Auden's influence on other poets in terms of an ambivalent retreat from the High Modernism of Eliot, Pound, and the later Yeats, but few have noted how Auden's commitment to poetic honesty illuminates an ambivalence at the heart of High Modernism itself. On one hand, Auden's devotion to precision aligns him with the early Pound's belief that the modern poet's responsibility is to keep the tools of communication clean (even as his horror of demagoguery distances him from the later Pound, eagerly broadcasting his views over Rome radio). On the other hand, Auden's resistance to untruth frequently places him in opposition to the Modernist embrace of myth as a valid structuring principle for poetry and life. Negative models on this front included Rilke and (less explicitly) Eliot, but the greatest source of consternation was Yeats, who in 1935 told Laura Riding that poets should be good liars. In 1960, Auden named theatricality the great flaw of the masculine imagination and called Yeats one of that imagination's great exemplars. In a letter of 1964 he referred to Yeats as "a symbol of my own devil of unauthenticity, of everything which I must try to eliminate from my own poetry, false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities." It was Auden's aversion to certain deployments of myth, however, that most specifically marked his distance from the writer who produced *A Vision*. In a 1942 review in *Partisan Review* of Louise Bogan's poetry he aligned myth with a mistaken belief that poetry can develop apart from life, and numbered the Yeats of the lunar phases (along with mythifiers of history and the id) among those Modern poets who ask "of a general idea, not Is It True?, but Is It Exciting? Is It Poetically Useful?"

Auden's dislike of such recourse to myth was clearly shaped by his coming of age as an English person in the aftermath of the Great War and as a poet in the 1930s. With others of his generation he had witnessed the terrible costs of nationalist and militarist fictionalizing, and in Fascism and Nazism he would see such fictions deployed more effectively and disastrously still. Unlike many of his peers, however, he was led by his unease with this kind of storytelling to avoid placing his poetry in the service of particular political lines. It is therefore another great irony of his reception that Auden gained early notice as a propagandist and in some quarters is still remembered principally as the court poet of the 1930s left. Although his rise to public recognition had begun, in a sense, even before he left Oxford in 1928, it jelled around the publication of the anthologies *New Signatures* (1932) and especially *New Country* (1933), edited by the Communist writer Michael Roberts: the contributors to these collections quickly became known as "the Auden group," and Auden was touted as the representative of a new generation advocating a revolutionary politics. This was not an unreasonable inference, given that one of his entries was entitled "A Communist to Others," but in fact Auden only briefly considered joining the Communist party, and the poem in question has nothing to say about Communist principles or practice. Rather, it concentrates on the mendacity of the British ruling class, which Auden regarded as his own but believed destined for a well-deserved dissolution:

> A host of columbines and pathics
> Who show the poor by mathematics
> In their defence
> That wealth and poverty are merely
> Mental pictures, so that clearly
> Every tramp's a landlord really
> In mind-events.

Some have regarded the text as a sort of dramatic monologue, in which case it becomes still less legible as the enunciation of a party line. In any case, Auden would never again write even so nearly partisan a poem.

Auden's poetry is not apolitical, however. Much of his writing is pervaded not only by an awareness of suffering in the world, but also by a left-leaning belief that the lessening of this suffering may require the remaking of social institutions. Wary of party-line myths as Auden was, he was also alert to the ways in which myths of other kinds could distract from—or, worse, excuse—human misery. After his return to Christianity in 1940, Auden aligned himself, tellingly, with the activist Protestantism of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, and against followers of Karl Barth who believed that the transcendental nature of the kingdom of heaven made social reform irrelevant to Christian concerns. For Auden the central contradiction of living was that one can always be doing more to alleviate the wretchedness of others, although no one can live wholly selflessly all the time. Guilt is thus structurally inescapable and understandable to the compassionate intelligence, yet undiminished by its universality.

Auden's writings from both before and after 1940 testify amply to his recognition that the comforts of some are bought at the price of others' deprivation. In "A Summer Night" (1933), he asks,

> what doubtful act allows
> Our freedom in this English house
> Our picnics in the sun,

a question that both evokes Yeats' "Ancestral Houses" and anticipates Walter Benjamin's 1940 notation (which may have remained unknown to Auden but profoundly influenced later generations of British intellectuals) that no document of civilization is not also a document of barbarism. In Auden's most famous longer work, "The Sea and the Mirror" (1944), the astute Caliban observes, "We should not be sitting here now, washed, warm, well-fed . . . unless there were others who are not here," others whose poverty makes possible "our" provision. Of all his variations on this theme, however, the one that may have meant the most to Auden himself appears in the sequence "Horae Canonicae" (1949–54), which he always gave a place of importance in later collections. In the "Nones" section, composed in 1950, implication in the murder of Christ appears as the archetype or essence of continuous responsibility for others' injury:

> wherever
> The sun shines, brooks run, books are written,
> There will also be this death.
> . . . .

we have time
To misrepresent, excuse, deny,
Mythify, use this event
While, under a hotel bed, in prison,
Down wrong turnings, its meaning
Waits for our lives[.]

Whether Auden recognized how he himself mythifies the crucifixion in this instance is an open question, as is the more general one of whether, in poems like "The Shield of Achilles" (1952), his employment of mythology is best described as critically ironic or ambivalently admiring. (This latter possibility finds support in places like 1948's "In Praise of Limestone," wherein Auden's speaker cherishes statues that "obviously doubt" the "antimythological myth" of the poet of disenchantment.)

Whatever his investment in demythologizing, however, Auden clearly did not believe his major function to be that of calling attention to misery: although he insisted that poetry must not turn away from evils, he stated no less emphatically that its primary function has to do with what is good. In his most expansive declaration of a poetics, 1956's "Making, Knowing and Judging," he emphasizes that "every poem is rooted in imaginative awe," and that although poetry can accomplish many things, "there is only one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being and for happening." In 1950 Auden wrote feelingly of "our duty to be happy," and his poetry from the late 1950s and after finds him much occupied with domestic order and creature comforts—a turn that led several critics to lament a once ambitious poet's decline into technically splendid triviality and others to regard his whole corpus as frivolous.

Yet it would be a mistake to describe Auden's trajectory as one of increasing interest in praising and diminishing interest in guilt, for these elements appear in close proximity throughout his career. In his famous Yeats elegy of 1939 Auden concludes by exhorting the poet to "Teach the free man how to praise," having asserted in an earlier section that poetry "makes nothing happen" and is instead a "way of happening, a mouth." Just a year before, however, he had written (in one of the extraordinary "Sonnets from China," also known under the title "In Time of War"):

Certainly praise: let the song mount again and again
For life as it blossoms out in a jar or a face,
For the vegetable patience, the animal grace;
Some people have been happy; there have been great men.

But hear the morning's injured weeping, and know why:
Cities and men have fallen; the will of the Unjust
Has never lost its power; still, all princes must
Employ the Fairly-Noble unifying Lie.

For Auden the function of ritual and the ontology of happening go together. Like other forms of praise, poetry is both a recollection of other events and an event in itself; insofar as it is the latter, it should be purely good, but insofar as it is the former, it needs to include ugliness. Or as he put it in a note of 1950 (later incorporated into "The Virgin and the Dynamo," 1962), every poem "is an attempt to present an analogy to that paradisal state in which Freedom and Law, System and Order are united in harmony[.]" Thi effect of this perfection will be evil

to the degree that beauty is taken, not as analogous to, but identical with goodness . . . and the conclusion drawn that, since all is well in the work of art, all is well in history. But all is not well there.

This last quotation illuminates two of the most prominent characteristics of Auden's mature verse: its didacticism and its embrace of traditional forms. Auden's earliest poetry was not primarily didactic: although full of declarative sentences, poems such as the one later called "The Secret Agent" (1928) unfolded narratives whose facts were obscure and whose meanings were opaque. It was just this quality of hard-edged reticence that inspired devotion in Auden's first enthusiasts, however; one of his best received works of the 1930s was *The Orators* (1932), which many reviewers praised but which few pretended to understand. Even harder to decipher than *The Waste Land* in certain respects, Auden's early poems are also noteworthy for their thematic and sonic toughness. Many were occupied with normatively masculine and unpoetic phenomena such as machines and spying, and many were energized by Auden's casual adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line. (This last feature constitutes another link to Pound, and to a poetic tradition that Tom Paulin has named "Gothic": a "northern and consonantal" tradition marked by a "fricative, spiky, spoken texture" and encompassing Donne, Jonson, Browning, Hardy, and Frost.)

The virtues of Auden's early style appear most intriguingly, perhaps, in a poem that also incorporates a new direction. In "It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens" (later titled "1929," after its year of composition), Auden uses his jagged contours to render something like pre-linguistic consciousness but locates this very rendering in the mind of an adult speaker meditating on human life in general:

Is first baby, warm in mother,
Before born and is still mother,
Time passes and now is other,
Is knowledge in him now of other,
Cries in cold air, himself no friend.

The last section of "It was Easter" concludes on the characteristically mystifying note of the early poetry but begins with a line heralding Auden's new didactic strain: "It is time for the destruction of error." In the next few years, Auden would perfect the mode of conversational but firm declaration that was to sustain him for the next four decades, the mode of, "The eyes of the crow and the eye of the camera open / Onto Homer's world, not ours" ("Memorial for the City," 1949) and

though one cannot always
Remember exactly why one has been happy,
There is no forgetting that one was. ("Good-bye to the Mezzogiorno," 1958)

Biographers agree that from an early age Auden liked dispensing wisdom, and that as he grew older he grew increasingly rigid in his daily routine. In the poet's own view his predilection for quietly sweeping statements was bound up with an affinity for traditional poetic structures, as a 1942 letter reveals. In order to purge his poetry of "its whiff of the hearty scoutmaster," he told his correspondent Stephen Spender, he would have to "deprive

[him]self of the support of strict conventional forms," but he never seriously undertook that project. Although he did develop new resources for poetry in English, he almost never ventured into fragmentation, typographical disruption, or even irregular stanzas and is rightly seen as a leading figure in the reaction against High Modernism's opening-up of form. In a series of aphorisms composed near the end of his life, Auden at his most conservative wrote, "Blessed be all metrical rules that forbid automatic responses, / force us to have second thoughts, free from the fetters of Self." What underlay his formal inclination, however, was less a love of impersonality than a taste for a world in which maximum freedom would not imply maximum disorder. In the magnificent conclusion of his 1939 elegy for Freud, he relays both his affection for libido's disruptive capabilities and his esteem for its sublimated, productive aspect: "Sad is Eros, builder of cities, / And weeping anarchic Aphrodite."

The Freud elegy is especially important, formally speaking, because it was the first of many important poems that Auden would write in syllabic verse, which he later described as a way of "achieving a balance between freedom and order." Auden surely discerned a kindred spirit in Marianne Moore, who shared his combination of humility and self-confidence, his love for the world, his intellectuality, and his commitment to a poetry fusing restraint and innovation. In 1939 he told her, "Like Rilke, you really do 'Praise,'" and he eventually adapted the syllabic construction for which she was known to his own purposes. But syllabic verse was far from the only technical possibility he vitalized. One of the first major 20th-century poets to revisit the now standard sestina and villanelle, Auden also made a case for rhyme royal in his "Letter to Lord Byron" (1936) and for both the long philosophical poem and the neoclassical rhymed couplet in "New Year Letter" (1940). In works like "For the Time Being" (1941–42), "The Sea and the Mirror," "The Age of Anxiety" (1944–46), "Horae Canonicae," "Bucolics" (1952–53), and "Thanksgiving for a Habitat" (1958–64), he perfected the art of linking poems in several forms into coherent sequences. In 1959 he assembled 50 short prose meditations on love and poetry into "Dichtung und Wahrheit," a text like nothing else of its time. Auden did not by himself inspire postwar poetry's extended engagement with traditional patterns, but his virtuoso performances did play a crucial exemplary role.

If 1939 has usually been regarded as the watershed in Auden's career, this is so not only because that year produced the Freud and Yeats elegies, but also because it witnessed the poet's emigration to the United States. In the short term this departure helped to diminish Auden's cachet in Britain, not least because it left him open to the charge of deserting his country in its hour of need. In fact, he seems to have had several motivations for the move, none of which included fear for personal safety. His installation in New York and environs did, however, enhance Auden's influence on American writing. In the 1930s his work captivated savvy Americans from a distance, as Elizabeth Bishop would later recall, but in subsequent decades he touched immediately and consequentially poets like Richard Howard, James Merrill (who made him one of the principal ghosts of *The Changing Light at Sandover*), Sylvia Plath, James Schuyler, and Richard Wilbur. Also crucial was Auden's tenure as editor of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, which on his recommendation published first books by (among other eventual luminaries) Adrienne Rich, W.S. Merwin, John Ashbery, James Wright, and John Hollander. In spite of these American genealogies and his acquisition of American citizenship in 1946, however, Auden continues to be treated principally as a British poet, perhaps because postwar British and Irish poetry (less forcefully diversified, in the long run, by avant-gardist imperatives) seems to evoke him more consistently than its American counterpart.

Since Auden's death his admirers have profited from the care and insightfulness of his literary executor. In addition to publishing richly nuanced critical studies, Mendelson has complemented the *Collected Poems* with a *Selected Poems*, reprinting original rather than revised texts, and has been releasing singly the components of a multi-volume edition of Auden's complete works (also using earliest published versions). Filling out the Auden canon are Mendelson's 1977 *The English Auden*, which gathers poems, essays, and dramatic writing through 1939; Katherine Bucknell's 1994 edition of Auden's juvenilia; and three volumes of *Auden Studies* edited by Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins and combining primary with secondary material. Auden's reputation as one of the great poets of the 20th century has only grown more secure, although his work's resistance to many traditional manifestations of ambition has required some rethinking of the criteria for major poetry. It is instructive that one study (McDiarmid, 1990) tries less to liberate Auden from the accusation of triviality than to draw from his playfulness a serious argument about poetry's limitations, while another (Boly, 1991) argues that Auden's concern is to help readers resist the operations of rhetoric by making them more attentive to what happens when they read.

Studies like these notwithstanding, Auden has not benefited as much as might have been expected from strong interest in the intersections of politics and language. The more potent renewal of enthusiasm at century's end, arguably, has come from an aspect of his life and work that he might have been surprised to find figuring so large: his sexuality. Burgeoning interest in gay writing has brought to the forefront the sometimes conflicted but never closeted figure who began his sexual education early and (in the company of Christopher Isherwood) advanced it in interwar Berlin; the maritally inclined romantic who found a mate and collaborator (but only briefly a lover) in Chester Kallman; and the sometimes campy conversationalist who long after his conversion was given to speaking of "Miss God." Complementing attention to these biographical Audens, moreover, is a renewal of fascination with another textual Auden, the writer of such luminous meditations on desire as "Lay your sleeping head, my love" (1937), "Law Like Love" (1939), and "First Things First" (1957). Nor is this fascination limited to the kinds of audiences who routinely purchase books of poetry. Following a moving adaptation of "Stop all the clocks" (1936) to the demands of gay elegy in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Faber released a special edition of ten Auden poems called *Tell Me the Truth about Love;* named for a line from a 1938 poem, the volume has since sold more than 250,000 copies. How Auden might have reacted to the phenomenon no one can know, of course. But he would not have been wholly displeased, surely, to find truth as well as love in the title of his best-selling work to date.

DOUGLAS MAO

Biography

Born in York, England, 21 February 1907. Attended Oxford University, Oxford, England, 1925–28, B.A. 1928;

schoolmaster, Larchfield Academy, Helensburgh, Scotland, and Downs School, Colwall, England, 1930–35; co-founder, Group Theatre, 1932; stretcher-bearer, Spanish Civil War, 1937; teacher, St. Mark's School, Southborough, Massachusetts, 1939–40; faculty member, American Writers League School, New York, 1939; teacher, New School for Social Research, New York City, 1940–41, 1946–47; faculty member, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1941–42, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, 1942–45, Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, 1943–45, Bennington College, Vermont, 1946, Barnard College, New York, 1947; editor, Yale Series of Younger Poets, 1947–62; co-founder, The Reader's Subscription Book Club, 1951; Professor, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, 1953; Chancellor, Academy of American Poets, 1954–73; Professor, Oxford University, Oxford, England, 1956–61; co-founder, Mid-Century Book Society, 1959. Received King's Gold Medal for Poetry, 1937; Guggenheim fellowships, 1942, 1945; American Academy of Arts and Letters Award of Merit Medal, 1945, and Gold Medal, 1968; Pulitzer Prize, 1948; Bollingen Prize, 1954; National Book Award, 1956; Feltrinelli Prize, 1957; Guinness Award, 1959; Poetry Society of America Alexander Droutzkoy Memorial Award, 1959; honorary Litt.D., Swarthmore College, 1964; Austrian State Prize for European Literature, 1966; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1966; National Medal for Literature of National Book Committee, 1967. Died in Vienna, Austria, 28 September 1973.

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In Memory of W.B. Yeats

W.H. Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" (first published in *New Republic* [8 March 1939]) is a Modernist elegy on the occasion of the death of William Butler Yeats in the south of France, 28 January 1939. Two days earlier Auden had arrived from England in New York harbor during a snowstorm, making this his first American poem. Auden portrayed Yeats' death as a tragedy for the world of letters, a tragedy that also reflects the general disorder on the eve of World War II. Yeats was both a private and a public figure, a lyric autobiographer and a prophetic poet on a grand historical scale, but his weaknesses for rich women, the occult, and reactionary politics qualified Auden's admiration. Like "A Pact," in which Ezra Pound comes to terms with his differences with Walt Whitman, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" is Auden's vehicle for coming to terms with Yeats as a great poet whose antidemocratic ideals Auden, a radical socialist, found abhorrent.

Part One begins on an objective note, emphasized by the sincerity of its variable free verse, with a description of the weather in New York at the time of Yeats' death. The elegiac tone undercuts this detachment, however, transforming scientific into symbolic terms. In the "dead of winter" all nature, commerce, and public life have come to a standstill, yet elsewhere life goes on in the rhythms of nature: wolves run through "evergreen forests" and rivers flow past "fashionable quays." But however one measures the impact of the poet's death, Auden notes, "What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day." Auden's change of this line (originally "O all the instruments agree") suggests that Auden is striving for objectivity by avoiding too exact an echo of Yeats' own line ("O sages standing in God's holy fire") from "Sailing to Byzantium," while providing the obligatory echo common to elegy.

Describing Yeats' "last afternoon as himself," however, the third stanza echoes the metaphor of the body in "Sailing to Byzantium" as "no country for old men" by developing an extended metaphor of Yeats as a country to himself, his provinces in revolt, squares empty, and suburbs gone silent. The electrical "current of his feelings" has "failed," but while his life force has been extinguished, Yeats "became his admirers." Like Osiris, the Egyptian god of fertility, Yeats is (in his works) "scattered among a hundred cities" and "given over to [the] unfamiliar affections" of his readers: "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living." In the ecology of reading, Yeats is consumed and digested, his life force not destroyed but recycled.

In Part One's final stanza, Auden confronts his ideological differences with Yeats over economics and social justice. Auden compares the brokers of capitalism to "beasts," evoking Yeats' image of the "rough beast" that "Slouches towards Bethlehem" in his apocalyptic poem "The Second Coming." Yeats believed the poor to be a necessary economic evil who must become "fairly accustomed" to their sufferings, but Auden wrings irony from "fairly" to suggest that the poor can never see such a system as fair but can become only *slightly* or *relatively* accustomed to their lot, even if "each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom." Nevertheless, a select group of readers—"a few thousand"—will look back on the day Yeats died as "a day when one did something slightly unusual."

In the single stanza of Part Two (not included in the poem's first publication), the tone shifts as Auden addresses Yeats familiarly: "You were silly like us: your gift survived it all." Its iambic hexameter, a classical meter, like its thematic movement from the particular to the universal, shows Auden striving to extract a general lesson from Yeats' life and death by putting aside his disagreements to measure the man's faults against the poet's "gift." Auden divorces the transitory and "silly" concerns of Yeats' personal life (his love life in the "parish of rich women") and political views (his engagement in Ireland's struggles, changeless as "her madness and her weather") from what can be seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.

This clears the way for Auden's own *ars poetica*—"poetry makes nothing happen"—which reflects the Modernist idea that poetic discourse is unique, and the poem a self-sufficient, autotelic object, an end in itself and not polemical or didactic. Like a river that springs from a place "where executives / Would never want to tamper," poetry flows from real feelings of "isolation and busy griefs," but survives less as a set of beliefs than as "A way of happening." The premise "poetry makes nothing happen," then, takes on an additional meaning: poetry has no practical effect in the world, but by making what did not exist (nothing) come into existence (happen), the poem endures in a way that the everyday world of the "Raw towns that we believe and die in" cannot.

Part Three concludes on a traditionally elegiac note. In six quatrains of rhymed iambic tetrameter couplets suitable for prayers, Auden lays "an honoured guest" to rest: "Let the Irish vessel lie / Emptied of its poetry." Revising the poem for *Collected Shorter Poems* (1966), Auden omitted three stanzas that repeat Part Two's suggestion that time will pardon Yeats, like Rudyard Kipling and Paul Claudel, for "writing well." Choosing instead to proceed directly to the present threat of another war in Europe, Auden raises the tone of his argument with Yeats' ideology. Instead of blaming Yeats for the "nightmare of the dark" in which "All the dogs of Europe bark," Auden invokes Yeats the poet to combat the "Intellectual disgrace" and to "persuade us to rejoice" with the humanity of his poetry's "unconstraining voice." Here Auden is again paying homage to Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," in which Yeats invokes the "the singing-masters" of his soul to "clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress."

Auden concludes by returning to nature metaphors, asking that the buried poet (Osiris-like) make fertile the fields of poetry: "With the farming of a verse / Make a vineyard of the curse." In Yeats' "Adam's Curse," the title refers to God's curse that man work for a living after expulsion from the Garden of Eden. While Yeats' poem is a love poem to Maud Gonne, Auden makes the curse a political and aesthetic duty to "Sing of human unsuccess / In a rapture of distress" and to

> Let the healing fountain start,
> In the prison of his days
> Teach the free man how to praise.

That these last two lines are inscribed on Auden's tomb in Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey may be ironic, since they are from an elegy critical of its subject. "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" is an excellent example of Auden's poetic resourcefulness of tone, voice, and prosody, some of which one can say he learned from Yeats. But the poem is also a tribute, if an argumentative tribute, to the senior poet of the elder generation, in which Auden respectfully resolves their ideological differences by weaving strands of Yeats' verse into his own *ars poetica*.

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In Praise of Limestone

"In Praise of Limestone," one of W.H. Auden's most accomplished poems, was first published in July 1948 in *Horizon,* subsequently included in *Nones* (1951), and slightly revised for reprinting in succeeding collections. Written in sinuous syllabic lines, the poem is a Horatian ode sustaining comfortable tempo and conversational tone without ever lapsing into the garrulity or digressiveness that would mar some of Auden's later compositions. As the first poem Auden wrote on the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples, it also marks the beginning of his interest in Italy and affection for the Mediterranean people and country.

The poem opens by celebrating the Italian limestone landscape, with its tangible slopes, statues, fountains, caves, "short distances and definite places," and commending the simple lives led by its inhabitants, unmolested by grandiose inclinations and fantasies of transcendence. Auden suggests that humanity is naturally homesick for this landscape, because it forms an allegory of the human body with its expressly maternal contours and vaguely erotic arrangements. He asserts the common values of life, viewing limestone country as the only truly human landscape because it promotes moderation in judgment, ambition, love, and spirituality. It is a landscape of innocence, signifying not only proximity between human community and its natural habitat, but also freedom from intellectual arrogance and absolutist temptations.

Auden then contrasts people who live in the moment with those who view their lives as ceaseless processes of education and self-perfection. While the landscape emanates an air of peacefulness and innocence, with the locals climbing the slopes "Arm in arm, but never, thank God, in step," it also bears discernible signs of hopelessness and resignation. The southern habitat is self-sufficient, but also surrendered to the reality of death and sin. The poem underscores the distinction between "the inconstant ones," ordinary people attached to life in obscurity and moderation, and "the best and the worst of us," those who leave the Edenic landscape of rock and water and move into "immoderate soils" in pursuit of higher ambitions and ideals. Auden associates these fugitives from the limestone country with mountains, plains, and seas: the solidity and permanence of mountain granite lures future saints, the malleability of clay and gravel plains seduces politicians and social reformers, while the "oceanic whisper" entices the "really reckless," or nihilists.

But at this point in the poem Auden makes a surprising admission. The voices of granite, gravel, clay, and the ocean "were right / And still are." The limestone landscape has its own imperfections. It is, like the human body, constantly changing and susceptible to decay. It is not a site of escape or even a place of return. The modern poet (presumably a reference to Wallace Stevens) calling "The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle," the modern scientist only concerned with "Nature's / Remotest aspects," and even the speaker (or Auden) himself "reproached, for what / And how much you know" refuse the reality of the flesh. They reject a chance for restored authenticity and spontaneity realizable only when they have abandoned their quest for transcendence and recognized the mutable body—exemplified by the limestone landscape—as their true home. But is this ever possible? After all, "this land is not the sweet home that it looks": the poet, the scientist, and the speaker are justified in their search of abstraction and understanding. Although the poem celebrates harmony between nature and human beings and promotes the holiness of physical love, it also admits the inevitability of human demands for something other than what simple mundane reality can offer. In the intentionally anti-climactic final passages, Auden envisions moderate existence in the limestone country reconciled with ideals of "faultless love" and spiritual meditations on "the life to come."

Because of its discreet references to a solitary listener, the poem can be viewed as a personal address to Auden's lover, Chester Kallman, whose glimpses we catch especially in the original, more explicit version of the poem: "the nude young male . . . lounges / Against a rock displaying his dildo." Regarded as such, the poem presents an argument to transcend time in uninhibited eroticism, even if it ultimately results in faithlessness and absence. More conspicuously, "In Praise of Limestone" reflects Auden's childhood fascination with lead mines. With the transformation of English lead-mine country into Edenic limestone landscape of southern Italy, the poem, like other important pieces written in Ischia, explores the contrast between the northern Protestant culture, predicated on guilt and self-improvement, and the culture of the Mediterranean world based on shame and self-acceptance. The northern environment of exclusion and isolation, superficiality and speculation, counters the communal epicureanism and decadence of the south's simple residents, but it is eventually dependent on these values as well. Ten years after writing "In Praise of Limestone," Auden reached the same conclusion in his farewell to the Mediterranean world of marble landscapes and modest temperaments, "Good-bye to the Mezzogiorno."

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Musée des Beaux Arts

There are many reasons why "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938) should be one of W.H. Auden's best known and most widely anthologized poems. To those who value lyric compression, it offers 21 lines of extraordinary complexity, yet does so with a feeling of ease and a directness that make it accessible even on a first reading. To those in search of characteristic Auden, it offers the coolly assured didacticism for which that poet was famous. To those seeking representative early 20th-century lyric, it offers a typically modern preoccupation with pain and evil as well as that interweaving of the conversational and the momentous often considered one of the period's major innovations. To readers whose expectations have been formed by mainstream post–World War II poetry it offers crisp images and a cleanly stated moral, linked together by the consciousness of a thoughtful observer. And to connoisseurs of interart relations, it offers a superb addition to an ekphrastic tradition (Wordsworth's "Peele Castle," Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Rilke's "Archaïscher Torso Apollos" ["Archaic Torso of Apollo"]) in which the lyric speaker is moved to reflection by a work of visual art.

But while "Musée des Beaux Arts" fills all of these roles admirably, the ways in which it does so are usually less straightforward than they may seem, and the extent to which it does so is sometimes less than complete. Consider, for example, the question of its representativeness as an Auden lyric. From its first words ("About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters"), the poem is marked by Auden's characteristically definite declaration, the commitment to telling as well as showing that constituted one of his major breaks with Modernism in the Imagist line. "Musée des Beaux Arts" depends much more heavily on showing than is usual for Auden, however, and insofar as it seems to focus on particular paintings, its manner of showing is atypical as well. Although hardly a poet without pictures, Auden was famously fond of abstract statement, and when he did use images preferred generic elements to detailed particulars (a city, a mountain, or a tree rather than London, a mountain dotted with scrub pines, or the tree at his window). The poems in which Auden does rely on intimate description and highly individual objects—the shield of Achilles, the limestone landscape, even the body of Yeats in his Yeats elegy—have been among his most celebrated, but this recognition may say more about readerly taste than about Auden's peculiar strengths.

Moreover, the form of "Musée des Beaux Arts" is uncharacteristically open. Although all but one of its lines finds a rhyme, the rhyme scheme is highly asymmetrical, and enormous variation in line length—from five to 22 syllables and from two to eight beats—helps to conceal the rhymes so well that some readers never notice them. In addition, 14 of the line endings are enjambed, and the enjambment is frequently severe: "skating / On a pond"; "may / Have heard"; "the green / Water." None of this is usual for Auden, who tended to foreground rhyme when using it, who preferred to adhere to one stanza form through the whole of a poem, and who normally maintained a higher ratio of end-stopped lines to sharply enjambed ones. "Musée des Beaux Arts" thus reads more like free verse than almost anything else Auden wrote, which is to say that when presented as archetypal Auden in anthologies or literary histories, it may obscure the extent of his break with the High Modernism of writers like Pound, Williams, and the 1920s Eliot. The reader encountering Auden only in this lyric and one or two others may see his poetry more as a dilution of Modernist innovations than as a deliberate reversal or meaningful revision, and may have trouble understanding why his work was so important to poets of succeeding generations.

On the thematic side, "Musée des Beaux Arts" is in a sense *more* representative of Auden than will be evident to the reader who understands it principally as the record of a meditation prompted by a particular painting. Auden wrote the poem while in Brussels, where the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts house the *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* as well as two other Brueghels alluded to in the first stanza, *The Numbering at Bethlehem* and *Winter Landscape with Skaters.* (A fourth Brueghel clearly involved in the poem, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* hangs in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.) Auden had been thinking about the relation between those who suffer and those who do not since the beginning of his poetic career, however, and found it especially preoccupying through much of 1938 and 1939. The other poems he wrote in December 1938 all concern suffering and responsibility in some way, as do sections from "A Voyage" written the previous January (two mention suffering explicitly in their last lines), the "Sonnets from China" of mid-1938, several important poems from 1939, including "Voltaire at Ferney" and "September 1, 1939," and a compellingly large part of his subsequent writing.

Where not viewed as itself coldly indifferent, "Musée des Beaux Arts" has usually been treated as an admonition, an indictment, or a lament: with an understatement designed to render the banality of evil more rather than less disturbing, it is argued, the poem condemns people's habitual inattention to the miseries of others and by implication exhorts its reader to avoid this failing. Such a reading is clearly supported by the references to how "everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster" and to "the expensive delicate ship" that "Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on." In both instances, the non-suffering are rendered more culpable by their comfortableness (they have nothing else as urgent to attend to) and by a language of affluence that evokes the class antagonism that absorbed Auden in the 1930s. Moreover, the title of the poem, along with the expensive delicacy of the ship, seems to bring art itself under the shadow of blame, recalling how going to a museum to see beautiful ("beaux") representations of injuries—or reading a poem about disaster, for that matter—might constitute a leisurely turning-away disguised as a turning-toward. This last point seems further supported by the handling of rhyme: many readers will notice it, if they notice it at all, only when they get to the second-stanza couplets ("away"/"may" and "green"/"seen"). The poem invites a formal replication of the inattention it decries.

It should be clear, however, that this very effect can extenuate as readily as indict. By inducing "complicity" with the inattentive, the poem could be emphasizing not how the reader participates in evil, but rather how no one can be attentive to everything all the time, and by extension, how inattention to suffering (however

wrong or harmful) may not be the kind of social problem subject to complete resolution through sheer moral exertion. A sonnet from earlier in the year (beginning "They are and suffer; that is all they do") renders with striking concentration the impossibility of sharing pain:

> Even a scratch we can't recall when cured,
> But are boisterous in a moment and believe
>
> In the common world of the injured. . . .

In the Yeats elegy of early 1939, Auden would famously defend poetry in spite of the fact that it not only "makes nothing happen" but also may absorb attention that could go elsewhere. And in the Voltaire poem Auden shows movingly how the sense of responsibility can become an obsession:

> So, like a sentinel, he could not sleep. The night was full of wrong,
> Earthquakes and executions. Soon he would be dead,
> And still all over Europe stood the horrible nurses
> Itching to boil their children. Only his verses
> Perhaps could stop them: He must go on working.
> Overhead
> The uncomplaining stars composed their lucid song.

Voltaire's commitment is at once neurotic and admirable, but whether to be commended or blamed, it says nothing about the case of the stars, which can only be believed capable of intervening in human affairs by the kind of superstition that Voltaire himself (and Auden with him) resisted.

In this respect it seems important that in "Musée des Beaux Arts" those who ignore great things transpiring nearby are humble beings, figures who might bring their admiration to the large event but who have neither the power nor the eminence to affect it in other ways. Auden names children skating, dogs, and a horse in the first stanza, and while the ploughman of the second may be culpably indifferent to the "forsaken cry" (assuming he hears it), his activity of ploughing counterbalances the "leisurely" used to describe the general turning away. The sun can no more intervene than can the stars in "Voltaire at Ferney." And although the ship may seem especially irritating in its unruffled progress, the predicating claim that it "must have seen" the disaster can only be true if one imagines it to be sensate or takes the line to refer to the crew (unlikely to be either "expensive" or "delicate"). It may be, then, that the error invited by the poem is not that of failing to attend, but that of laying blame in the wrong manner or in the wrong place, as on an object that cannot see or a horse with no moral part in its owner's actions. Even the pivotal "leisurely" finally mitigates the poem's disapprobation, for although the word is here used (correctly) as an adverb, the reader will be more accustomed to seeing it as an adjective. The adverbial sense suggests that the turning away is a matter of volition, but the adjectival overtone counters with a hint that "everything"—notably not "everyone"—in the painting is leisurely by nature. The adverbial makes turning away a matter of doing, but the adjectival makes it a matter of being.

Is the point of "Musée des Beaux Arts" therefore to legitimate indifference, or even to exonerate human beings from blame for their failures to help each other? To say so would be to ignore the force of those devices, mentioned earlier, that *have* led readers to understand this poem as admonitory. It would seem more accurate to say that although "Musée des Beaux Arts" foregrounds this central guilt, it also frames it in terms of an ethical contradiction: people can always be doing more to alleviate others' suffering, yet were they to listen constantly for cries and wait unremittingly for miracles (instead of eating, opening windows, or walking dully along), they would risk violating their own lives' claims to intrinsic, rather than merely instrumental, meaning. If, as many readers have suggested, the first stanza anticipates Auden's 1940 return to Christian belief, it is appropriate that the Nativity and the Crucifixion should come mediated through Brueghel, in the very liveliness of whose canvases Auden seems to have discerned a claim not on behalf of the secular as opposed to the religious, but on behalf of a vital quotidian that any credible Christianity would have to embrace. In "The Old and the New Masters" (1965) Randall Jarrell revised Auden by insisting, "About suffering, about adoration, the old masters / Disagree," and by seeing a Copernican step away from anthropocentrism in those pictures where the Crucifixion is exiled to "one corner of the canvas." Although William Carlos Williams' "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (1962) is a very different poem from Jarrell's, it too finds in its painting a demotion of legendary event, here in favor of pulsing nature:

> the whole pageantry
>
> of the year was
> awake tingling
>
> . . .
>
> there was
>
> a splash quite unnoticed
> this was
> Icarus drowning.

In Auden's poem, however, miracles, martyrdoms, and disasters retain their importance. The complication is that ordinary life, too, is allowed to lay its extraordinary claim.

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September 1, 1939

"September 1, 1939" is well known for having one of the most colorful histories of revision of any poem in W.H. Auden's canon. Auden had arrived in America from England on 26 January 1939, and many of his countrymen in Great Britain considered his move, coinciding with rumors of war, to be cowardly at least and perhaps even traitorous. From his newly adopted home Auden followed the troublesome events in Europe closely, and on 1 September 1939, the day that Hitler invaded Poland, Auden wrote out a draft of the poem. Within a year he was regularly attending Holy Communion in the Episcopal Church—his return to the Anglicanism of his childhood had been gradual—but his own distinctive Christian humanism lay behind the last and notorious line of the penultimate stanza: "We must love one another or die." Several years later Auden soberly pronounced the line "a damned lie," contending that one must die regardless of love; accordingly, in his *Collected Poetry* (1945) and *Collected Shorter Poems* (1950) the entire stanza in which the line appeared was deleted. In 1955, at the behest of an editor who wanted to reprint the complete poem, Auden changed the line to the more realistic, "We must love one another and die." He finally abandoned the poem altogether, however, and it was not included in Edward Mendelson's *Collected Poems* (1976). The original version of the poem reappeared for the first time in *The English Auden* (1977), which Mendelson edited, and is readily available in *Selected Poems* (1979), also edited by Mendelson.

Although Auden's fervent wish to see the poem removed from his body of work was matched and finally overcome by his readers' will to save the poem, this contest of wills reveals much that is central to the subject matter of the lyric. The poem is unique inasmuch as it was inspired by an isolated military action that would ultimately lead to World War II, and its sense of foreboding and impending doom seems clairvoyant at times. Several of the poem's most passionate defenders—Anthony Hecht and Joseph Brodsky, for example—lived through the conflict and were perhaps better equipped to recognize the sense of imminent cataclysm that pervades the poem and distinguishes each of its nine 11-line stanzas. What Auden's readers have found to be dramatically evocative about the poem Auden himself ultimately considered imprecise and vague. But the first stanza, with its "unmentionable odour of death," figures prominently in any discussion of the poem's connection with the vast tragedy that lay in wait for Europe, America, and Asia:

> I sit in one of the dives
> On Fifty-Second Street
> Uncertain and afraid
> As the clever hopes expire
> Of a low dishonest decade:
> Waves of anger and fear
> Circulate over the bright
> And darkened lands of the earth,
> Obsessing our private lives;
> The unmentionable odour of death
> Offends the September night.

Of course the portrayal of an *imminent* cataclysm must be necessarily vague, and even in the first stanza, this vagueness gives rise to the kinds of generalizations that would ultimately anger many of Auden's critics. In that stanza alone, however, several of the themes that had already occupied Auden, and would continue to do so until he died, are clearly present: psychology and neurosis; the conflict between the individual and the state; and the individual's moral responsibility in times of national crisis. These are the themes that engage Auden in this poem and in varying guises throughout his career. The poem's solution to these tensions, arriving in the last line of the last stanza, is eloquent, dignified, and vague:

> May I . . .
> Beleaguered by the same
> Negation and despair,
> Show an affirming flame.

It is a general solution to a generally articulated problem, yet the poetry of its stately trimeter has been largely convincing to readers.

As Auden aged he began to distrust idealism of all sorts, which probably led him to reject first the stanza that advises humanity to love one another or die and ultimately to reject the entire poem in which the advice appeared. Most readers recognize a degree of extremity in Auden's rejection of the poem, but as he remade his life, returning to the Anglican Church and taking up residence in America, he most likely grew impatient with the poem's penchant for social analysis, a legacy of the Marxist decade of the 1930s to which the poem recognizably belongs. Significantly, each of the 11-line stanzas comprises a single complete sentence, mostly in iambic trimeter. The long sentence allows Auden to argue at some length the point of each stanza, thoroughly increasing the poem's polemical effect, while the shorter three-beat line, the rhythmical unit of the argument, gives the poem an almost aphoristic quality: "All I have is a voice / To undo the folded lie," for example, or "Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?" A decade or so later, beside the confessional verse of the 1950s, Auden's poetry sounded didactic and impersonal to unsympathetic readers. There are clearly signs of this quality in several of the poem's more well-known phrases: "The strength of Collective Man," or "There is no such thing as the State / And no one exists alone." The poem has continued, however, to occupy a prominent place in Auden's canon because of its remarkable ability to blend the personal ("I *will* be true to the wife") with the apocalyptic ("We must love one another or die"); it ponders the uncertain future of a nation's citizens when their collective fate might well lie beyond their individual control. Accordingly, the poem falls midway between the obscure lyrics of Auden's youth and the occasional verse of his later years and so remains a powerful vehicle both of social criticism and personal revelation.

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Avant-Garde. *See* Experimental Poetry/The Avant-Garde

Awards. *See* Prizes

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B

Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) 1934–

Amiri Baraka is widely acknowledged as one of the most important African-American poets of the 20th century. His defining contributions to the Black Arts movement of the 1960s have ensured his lasting legacy in American letters. That said, Baraka's poetic development—from European literary Modernism to a Black Aesthetic, from black nationalism to revolutionary socialism—has been a unique and contested odyssey. It is certainly not by chance that his works have been the object of violently contrasting commentaries and appropriations by critics, cultural commentators, and fellow writers. Despite the many violent reversals of his poetic career, Baraka has consistently sought to define his poetry in opposition to European or Anglo-American Modernism, to explore instead the structures and forms of a black popular Modernism. There is, then, an underlying continuity of poetic concern in Baraka's varied expressions of black opposition.

Since the 1950s, Baraka has published more than a dozen highly influential works, among them his well-known collections of poetry *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* (1961), *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), *Black Magic: Collected Poetry, 1961–1967* (1969), *It's Nation Time* (1970), *Hard Facts* (1976), *Poetry for the Advanced* (1979), *Reggae or Not!* (1981), *In the Tradition* (1982), *Heathens* (1994), and *Wise, Why's, Y's* (1995). In his first volume of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note,* comprising poems written from 1958 to 1961, Baraka employs free-verse forms in an oblique and often elliptical style. The influence of William Carlos Williams' experiments with the "irregular foot" and Charles Olson's ideas of projective, or syllabic, verse are clearly present, as is the Beat aesthetic of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. In many of these early poems, Baraka's pursuit of an expressive poetry combining lyric realism, jazz rhythms, and abrupt turns of image and syntax is indebted to the formal innovations of Anglo-American Modernism, but he is also at pains to resolve the double bind of a black vernacular and a High Modernist aesthetic. As a result of this at times impossible translation, many of Baraka's early poems suffer from a kind of formally confused idiom as he struggles to achieve the necessary "destruction of the old temple" ("The Plumed Serpent"), while still seemingly unable to progress beyond an alienated and narcissistic self. The moving title poem treats existential themes of alienation and angst and is typical of this stylistic irresolution:

> Lately, I've become accustomed to the way
> The ground opens up and envelops me
> Each time I go out to walk the dog.
> Or the broad edged silly music the wind
> Makes when I run for the bus . . .
>
> Things have come to that.

The use of the first person is also typical of Baraka's early poetic self-image: a self doomed to irony, unable to figure any redemptive community beyond the alienated inner landscape of the black ego. In the poem "Hymn for Lanie Poo," for example—which takes as its motto Rimbaud's "*vous êtes des faux Nègres*"—the structure of alienated irony reaches its apotheosis as Baraka pours scorn on himself, as well as on the exotic primitivism of "*die schwartze Bohemein.*" Baraka's attempts to go beyond this structure of identification and resistance, and thus achieve a more stable poetic idiom, turn to music, especially jazz, as the poet seeks to travel beyond "the cold insensitive roads" on a journey into "what / we wanted to call 'ourselves'" ("Bridge"). Here Baraka visualizes the "changes" of music via the poet's "sliding through" into "unmentionable black." Despite such gestures to cultural continuity and transformation, the dominant tone of Baraka's first volume can be found in the ending of "Notes for a Speech," the poem that concludes the collection on a note of cultural estrangement and despair:

> Africa
> is a foreign place. You are
> as any sad man here
> american.

Not until his second volume, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), did Baraka's search for a black Modernist idiom or jazz measure lead him to a radical restaging of the culture and poetics of European Modernism, using a language marked more by anger than resignation. Gone is the elegiac lyricism of Baraka's first volume, replaced now by sardonic rage and vengeful irony as he scrutinizes the whole thematics of white bohemianism for its aesthetic contributions to "political art" ("Short Speech to My Friends"), rejecting that thematics as "a heap of broken feeling" ("Duncan Spoke of a Process"). This aesthetics of commitment, albeit

willfully crude and antagonistic, signifies a new concern with the social ramifications of poetry. A major turning point in Baraka's poetic development, this new concern emerges out of a period of deep self-questioning triggered by his 1960 visit to Cuba. In *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (1984), he comments, "Cuba split me open," adding that the trip was "a turning point in my life." There Baraka encountered political Third World artists and intellectuals who challenged his aesthetic and political convictions and insisted that his lack of interest in politics was itself political, that the modesty he espoused in separating art and politics was, in reality, that of a "cowardly bourgeois individualist." Moreover, he failed to counter their charge that his desire to cultivate the soul could not for a moment suffice in the "ugliness [he] live[d] in." Baraka's initial response, full of resentful bewilderment, later changed as he conceded the force of these arguments in his move to a new politicized awareness and black aesthetics of protest.

Baraka's quest for awareness begins with the question "What are influences?" ("Betancourt"). Conducting dialogues with W.B. Yeats (the "Crow Jane" sequence), William Carlos Williams ("A Contract for the Destruction and Rebuilding of Paterson"), and Valéry ("Valéry as Dictator"), among others, Baraka's yearning for change passes through the rarefied aestheticism of his earlier poetry in favor of an aesthetics of commitment. In "The Politics of Rich Painters," spoken cadences are dispersed through collage to denounce the commodification of formerly avant-gardist art, including his former Abstract Expressionist friends in Greenwich Village:

> You know the pity
> of democracy, that we must sit here
> and listen to how he made his money.

The open violence of this new, populist Modernism is motivated by a concern with ethnic, as against narrowly personal, freedoms of expression. In the essay "Expressive Language," for example, Baraka insists that "Black speech as a poetic reference" should enter into an alliance with "the cleansed / purpose" of a black aesthetic ("Black Dada Nihilismus"). In "Black Dada Nihilismus," which can be taken as emblematic of this aesthetic, Baraka uses tropes of sexual violence and racial revenge to negotiate the idiomatic and literary concerns of a radical black poetics. The poem enjoins its (presumably black male) readers to "Rape the white girls. Rape / their fathers. Cut the mothers' throats." In the course of this virulent anti-white fantasy, Baraka also aspires to an exorcism of Western culture via a cathartic immersion in black culture. The conflict between black ego and white bohemianism has been resolved, but through regression to a violent fantasy: indeed, Baraka's search for cathartic immersion becomes the signature of his espousal of a Black Aesthetic throughout the 1960s, especially during his black nationalist phase.

During these transitional years Baraka changed his name from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka. He wrote essays, notably *Blues People* (1963), "the first real attempt to place jazz and the blues within the context of American social history"; *Home* (1966), a collection of social and political ideas that Baraka developed between 1960 and 1965; and *Black Music* (1967), a study of outstanding contemporary jazz musicians. He has also produced and published some 20 plays, among them *Dutchman* (1964); a television play, "The Death of Malcolm X" (1969); and the popular and shocking collection *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1969). The Obie Award–winning *Dutchman* was widely celebrated; Norman Mailer, for instance, claimed that it was "the best play in America." Baraka's national success as a playwright went hand in hand with a growing black chauvinistic sensibility. An admirer of Malcolm X and a convert to that leader's revolutionary political doctrines of black nationalism, Baraka's poetics of blackness (indebted equally to ethical and political ideals of solidarity) became more pronounced after Malcolm's assassination in 1965. Abandoning and repudiating his Greenwich Village lifestyle, beliefs, wife and two children, as well as friends, Baraka decided to head uptown to Harlem in the name of race solidarity.

In Harlem, Baraka established the Black Arts Repertory/School. His writing from the mid-1960s through the end of the decade is avowedly nationalist, dedicated to overcoming white racism. Baraka's nationalist poetry is widely seen as the founding moment of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s. In addition to editing, with Larry Neal, an anthology of black writing, *Black Fire* (1968), Baraka published *Black Magic: Collected Poetry, 1961–1967* (1969), a collection of poems written seeking to establish race consciousness. The volume opens with "An Explanation of the Work," written in 1968, in which Baraka dismisses most of his early poetry as "a cloud of abstraction and disjointedness, that was just whiteness." The new affirmation of racialism, however, also leads to an abstract, concrete poetry in which meaning is displaced by pure spontaneity ("Vowels 2") and black poems are presented as weapons for the complete destruction of the white world. That destruction, demanded by the Black Arts movement's wish for a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic, leads Baraka to develop a separatist symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. Viewing the black poet as first and foremost an educator and agitator, Baraka's poetry becomes a rhetorical reflection of the racial ideology that precedes it; he presents his poems as political messages written to effect social change. As a result, the dominant motifs of these poems are those of a fiercely didactic and imperious anti-white rhetoric. The poem "Black Art" provides an exemplary instance of this trend, calling for

> . . . poems that wrestle cops into alleys
> and take their weapons leaving them dead
> with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff
> poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite
> politicians Airplane poems . . .
> . . . Setting fire and death to
> whities ass. Look at the Liberal
> Spokesman for the jews clutch his throat
> & puke himself into eternity . . .
> . . . Another bad poem cracking
> steel knuckles in a jewlady's mouth

The imperious rhetoric of such poems, the result of a language of hatred, is already compromised by the anti-bourgeois sentiments of the white avant-garde that act as the prototypes for Baraka's anti-white rhetoric. Even though Baraka uses black figures of speech—such as the dozens, scatting, shouts, chants, blues, and the uneven, syncopated rhythms of jazz—his repeated affirmation of the need for "a black poem. And a / black world" does not take this need beyond the level of a prescriptive exclusionism and can only disallow (while unwittingly repeating) the avant-garde rhetoric of European Modernism.

This failure probably explains Baraka's shift from the nationalist poetry of the 1960s to the fully-fledged Marxist-Leninism of *Hard Facts* (1976), a work that returns to the formal obliquities of *Black Magic* without the racist rhetoric. Indeed, in the "Introduction," Baraka asserts that he now disowns the "reactionary nationalism" of his former "narrow nationalist and bourgeois nationalist stand," repudiating it in favor of "Socialist Revolution." Such a conversion from race to history, however, is still indebted to a didactic idea of poetry: comparing the two phases, he states: "They were similar in the sense I see art as a weapon of revolution. It's just now that I define revolution in Marxist terms." In brief, Baraka still sees committed art as the way of overcoming the dichotomy between the accessible and the esoteric, black ideology and the poetic forms of Modernism. In "History on Wheels," for example, which denounces "a class of exploiters, / in black face," Baraka's anti-bourgeois rhetoric has come full circle. His attack on "the feverish nearreal fantasy" of Hollywood in "A New Reality Is Better Than a New Movie!" also repeats his ethical demand that true art should emerge from the rigorous consequence of attacking inner and outer alienation: "Inside beyond our craziness is reality" ("Reggae or Not!"). This is also why, in insisting on the political dimensions of writing, Baraka continues to adhere to an expressive aesthetic. In later works, such as *In the Tradition* (1982) and *Wise, Why's, Y's* (1995), Baraka's use of language-as-process continues to treat words as acts that refuse the quietism of any final communication, or judgment.

DAVID MARRIOTT

See also Black Arts Movement

Biography

Born Everett LeRoi Jones in Newark, New Jersey, 7 October 1934; changed name to Amiri Baraka in 1968. Attended Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1951–52; Howard University, Washington, D.C., 1953–54, B.A. 1954; served in the United States Air Force, 1954–57; teacher, New School for Social Research, New York, 1961–64 and summers 1977–79, State University of New York, Buffalo, summer 1964, and Columbia University, New York, 1964 and spring 1980; Visiting Professor, San Francisco State College, 1966–67, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1977–78, and George Washington University, Washington, D.C., 1978–79; Assistant Professor, 1980–82, Associate Professor, 1983–84, and since 1985 Professor of African Studies, State University of New York, Stony Brook; founder, *Yugen* magazine and Totem Press, 1958–62; editor, with Diane di Prima, *Floating Bear* magazine, 1961–63; founding director, Black Arts Repertory Theatre, Harlem, New York, 1964–66; since 1966 founding director, Spirit House, Newark; involved in Newark politics as member of the United Brothers, 1967, and Committee for Unified Newark, 1969–75; chair, Congress of Afrikan People, 1972–75. Received Whitney fellowship, 1961; Obie Award, 1964; Guggenheim fellowship, 1965; Yoruba Academy fellowship, 1965; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1966, Award, 1981; Dakar Festival Prize, 1966; honorary Litt.D., Malcolm X College, Chicago, 1972; Rockefeller grant, 1981; Before Columbus Foundation Award, 1984; American Book Award, 1984; member, Black Academy of Arts and Letters. Living in Stony Brook, New York.

Poetry

Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note, 1961
The Disguise, 1961
The Dead Lecturer, 1964
Black Art, 1966
A Poem for Black Hearts, 1967
Black Magic: Collected Poetry, 1961–1967, 1969
It's Nation Time, 1970
In Our Terribleness: Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style (with Fundi [Billy Abernathy]), 1970
Spirit Reach, 1972
Afrikan Revolution, 1973
Hard Facts, 1976
Poetry for the Advanced, 1979
Selected Poetry, 1979
AM/TRAK, 1979
Spring Song, 1979
Reggae or Not! 1981
In the Tradition, 1982
Thoughts for You! 1984
An Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones Poetry Sampler, 1991
The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader (includes prose), 1991
5 Boptrees, 1992
Heathens and Revolutionary Art: Poems and Lecture, 1994
Wise, Why's, Y's, 1995
Funk Lore: New Poems, 1984–1995, 1996

Other Writings: plays (*Dutchman,* 1964; *Money: A Jazz Opera* [with George Gruntz], 1982; *Primitive World* [music by David Murray], 1984), screenplays, novel (*The System of Dante's Hell,* 1965), short stories (*Tales,* 1967), essays and books on African-American culture and politics (*Blues People,* 1963; *Home,* 1966; *Black Music,* 1967), autobiography (*The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones,* 1984); edited collections of literature (*Confirmation; An Anthology of African American Women* [with Amina Baraka], 1983).

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Black People: This Is Our Destiny

Published in the section "Black Art" of the collection *Black Magic* (1969), "Black People: This Is Our Destiny" exemplifies the shift toward black nationalism and ethnic separatism that characterizes the poetry of Amiri Baraka in the late 1960s and that the poet

would reject in the 1970s in favor of a Marxist-Leninist approach. The poem carries to its extreme consequences Baraka's polemics against the rationalism of Western society by reversing the cultural dynamics of civilization traditionally invoked by white Westerners: the "primitives" will civilize the world, this is black people's destiny ("the primitives the first men who evolve again to civilize the world"). Baraka thus becomes both committed poet and black magician: the former sings the political reversal brought about by the magic of the latter.

In "An Explanation of the Work," the prefatory note to *Black Magic,* Baraka distances himself from *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) and *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* (1961), his earlier collections of poetry, claiming that they were the result of a "twisted society" and "European influence" and that they amounted to "a cloud of abstraction and disjointedness, that was just whiteness." On the contrary, *Black Magic* will focus on that "spirituality always trying to get through, to triumph, to walk across these dead bodies europeans call their minds." The preface announces the major contrasts that run throughout the collection and that inform "Black People: This Is Our Destiny": white versus black, sterile rationality (the "Explanation" associates the white mind to a dead body) versus spirituality and black magic. Baraka takes on a more committed and a decidedly separatist poetic persona.

From the very title "Black People: This Is Our Destiny," it is clear that Baraka is addressing black people directly, as a leader of a nation would. The poem (not to be confused with "Black People!," the text that ends the collection and that was cited as legal evidence against Baraka in the 1967 trial following the Newark riots) constructs a gendered ethnic pride and black nationalism by declaring black men "holy," "harmonized with creation," and longing for "the purity of the holy world." As in other poems collected in *Black Magic,* such holiness is coupled with a militaristic stance: black people have "the war" in their hearts. "Black People: This Is Our Destiny" affirms racial self-love and turns on its head the usual stereotype of racial self-hatred, which is employed in juxtaposition in other poems in the collection, such as "The Deadly Eyes." Black identity is strongly affirmed and linked to a movement of ascension (". . . in the holy black man's / eyes that we *rise,* whose race is only *direction up,* where / we go to meet the realization of makers *knowing who we are*"). Black men become part of a new creation and communion that encompasses "all existing forms of life, the gases, the plants, the ghost minerals the spirits the souls." As it is clear from this list, in this process spirituality pervades materiality, and tellingly the punctuation disappears to give a sense of togetherness. It is such a union of opposites that allows us to make sense of the first five lines, which play off against one another the geometric form of the straight line and that of the circle.

The poem invites the reader to read this union of contrastive forms in the materiality of the text itself since it consists of 19 long, straight lines (with the addition of a 20th line consisting simply of the word "world"), while its circularity is emphasized by the absence of a full stop at the end and by rhetorical devices, such as the polyptoton "embraced embracing" and the chiasmus "the storm of peace" / "a peaceful storm." As is often the case in Baraka's poems, there are no rhymes, and to create a sense of rhythm, the text relies on intonation (as suggested by the punctuation) and repetitions. Therefore, the poem takes on the heritage of the African-American oral tradition.

Tellingly, "rhythm," a word that signals Baraka's interest in African-American music, is invoked just before the call to the primitives to civilize the world. This is the last section of the text, and it stands apart from the rest of it thanks to the pause marked by the dots: ". . . vibration holy nuance beating against itself, a rhythm a playing." In this way, Baraka links the political content of the poem (the reversal of roles between civilized and primitives, between rationalism and irrationalism) with the African-American cultural tradition of oral art and music. Ethnic pride becomes both the content and the form of the poem, thus sustaining Baraka's critique of the use of form as mere aesthetic escapism, which the poet finds typical of white culture ("Gatsby's Theory of Aesthetics," "Kenyatta Listening to Mozart," and "Form Is Emptiness"). "Black People: This Is Our Destiny" is certainly characterized by that "convincing sense of integration" that Lloyd Brown (1980) has detected in the best poems of the collection *Black Magic:* "a compelling blend of magic as the essence of spirituality, magic as the chant of ethnic awakening, and magical chant as the sound, or tonal design, of politically committed poetry."

LUCA PRONO

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A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand

Amiri Baraka's "A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand" (1969) appeared in "Sabotage," one of three volumes included in *Black Magic* (1969), his first collection of poetry inspired by black nationalism. In these poems the narrator is unlike the young speaker of Baraka's previous works; he begins to speak for himself and to articulate to others his resolutions for political and social change in the external world, promoting black awareness through attacks on white racism and Western culture.

The "Sabotage" poems in *Black Magic* evolved out of Baraka's Greenwich Village period from 1961 to 1963. Although Baraka worked on "Sabotage" during those years, it was not published in the form of a collection until 1969. He wanted to be confident in his message, fully committed to the context of the poems, and certain that he would not mind offending those people with

whom he once associated. As Henry Lacey (1981) has noted, these poems are

> marked by an ever-increasing use of Afro-American allusions. In this manner, Baraka tells the former associates that he has different ideals and speaks from a different frame of reference.

With the poems in "Sabotage," "Baraka starting stripping away his ornate style, a style he identified with whiteness" (Harris, 1985), and began using the black chant and scream and black jazz forms. These poems, especially "A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand," were Baraka's way of taking a direct action in the world by attacking American society.

Baraka wrote "A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand" to his black middle-class and white liberal friends, the "Some People" of the title, to express his concern for them and their attitudes about his political interests. The first lines of the poem—

> Dull unwashed windows of eyes
> and buildings of industry. What
> industry do I practice? A slick
> colored boy. 12 miles from his
> home. I practice no industry.
> I am no longer a credit
> to my race

—express his artist-intellectual friends' image of him and their belief that he relinquished his place with the other "credits" to his race like George Washington Carver, Joe Louis, and Ralph Bunche. In their eyes he is just a colored boy 12 miles from home, practicing "no industry." Baraka, on the other hand, seeks a change in the condition of black people but has realized that the liberal protocol has not affected or even improved this condition:

> All the pitifully intelligent citizens
> I've forced myself to love.
> We have awaited the coming of a national
> phenomenon. Mystics and romantics, knowledgeable
> workers
> of the land.
> But none has come.
> (repeat)
> but none has come.
> Will the machinegunners please step forward?

The liberals are ironically labeled as the mystics and romantics who have had little or no effect on the social condition of black people, despite their ideals. Baraka is ready to take the necessary political action, and he disassociates with his friends who are either incapable of or refuse to take this same action. "A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand" publicly renounces his former friends and way of thinking.

Baraka sees no other alternative to political and social inequity but violence, and that is what "some people will have to understand" and accept. Baraka calls for the machinegunners to step forward because of his "feelings of urgency and impatience towards those he perceived of as standing in the way" (Harris, 1991). This poem places both political art and political action in opposition to the concept of art for art's sake.

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Beat Poetry

The reputation of the poetry written by Beat generation writers has suffered not from neglect but from the excessive media attention generated on its first appearances in the late 1950s. This attention, coming in the form of articles and photo spreads in popular magazines such as *Time* and *Life*, created an undue emphasis on the lifestyle aspects of something called the "beatnik" rather than on the substance of the poetry. All poetic movements are diminished by those imitators who grasp only the mannerisms of the masters without the hard-earned technique, but the reputations of the Beat writers have suffered even more as a result of the media hyperbole generated by the early furor. To this day, many of the prominent members of the Beat generation are not treated like the serious artists that they are.

The term "beatnik," in fact, is the hostile creation of an unsympathetic San Francisco journalist named Herb Caen. This amalgamation of the word "beat" with the name of the Soviet satellite "Sputnik" managed to associate a talented and diverse group of writers with something threatening, otherworldly, and un-American. The Beats, while certainly not to be confused with the Cold Warriors and the liberal academics who defined the mainstream of American intellectual life after World War II, were more likely to see themselves as living up to the potential for freedom and independence offered by the United States. Furthermore, the actual meaning of the term "Beat" is in fact ambiguous enough to cover a range of implications favored by the various writers associated with the movement. Some say that it originated in the

New York underworld, from which emerged Times Square hustler Herbert Huncke, who in the 1940s introduced the word to novelist William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg as a synonym for "downtrodden." A decade later, Jack Kerouac, who had been born and raised in the Roman Catholic Church, endowed the word with a more overtly religious connotation when he realized, on entering a cathedral, that the word "beat" is embedded in the words "beatitude" and "beatific."

Just as the word covers a wide range of social and spiritual connotations, the poetry associated with the Beat generation is also diverse and varied, so much so that it would be futile to define or even attempt to characterize the Beat poet or poem in any way except provisionally. How else could one account for the street lyrics of poets such as Jack Micheline and Ray Bremser, or the haiku variations of Kerouac and Lew Welch, or the Buddhist meditative lyrics of Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Joanne Kyger, not to mention the book-length epics published by Snyder (*Mountains and Rivers without End,* 1996) and Diane di Prima (*Loba,* 1998)? Part of the appeal of Beat poetry to its many readers rests precisely in this diversity and unpredictability. Thus, speaking generally and without attempting to define the standard Beat writer or Beat poem, one can only offer tentative characteristics shared by many of the participants in the movement.

The Beat generation consists of writers born mostly but not exclusively between the years 1920 and 1940. They published their first books in the late 1950s through the early 1970s, almost always with small, independent publishers. In terms of Western poetry, most of the Beats have roots in the British Romantic poets, such as William Blake (Ginsberg) or Percy Bysshe Shelley (Gregory Corso). However, unlike their vociferous critics, many Beats were far more cosmopolitan. In addition to the carefully studied Eastern influences on Snyder and Whalen (and later Ginsberg), Lawrence Ferlinghetti (Ph.D. from the Sorbonne and owner of City Lights Books) learned from several French writers, many of whom he translated into English and almost all of whom were unknown to American critics of the 1950s. Ed Sanders, furthermore, possessed an M.A. in classics from New York University, enabling him to adapt the idiom of Greek poetry to life in the 1960s. Besides these international sources, the Beats were far more willing than their contemporaries to embrace uniquely American literary sources, such as Walt Whitman, and musical forms, such as jazz and blues.

In addition to being learned (although not in ways generally acknowledged by the tastemakers of their time), most of the Beats valued some degree of spontaneity. Herein comes to play both the jazz influences and the Romantic tendency to value the unmediated experience, tendencies expressed by both the schooled poets, such as Ginsberg, Snyder, Whalen, and Ferlinghetti, and the unschooled poets, such as Micheline, Corso, and Bremser. However, unlike the British Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who in his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" theoretically advocated writing poetry that used the language of ordinary people, the Beats actually encouraged their friends from the margins of society to write prose and poetry.

Even with the characteristics offered so far, certain writers who are indisputably Beat have not been covered. Michael McClure, for instance, was neither Buddhist nor street poet. He was, however, one of the few writers to work in the theater and as a songwriter (he receives credit on the Janis Joplin hit "Mercedes Benz"). His former wife, Joanna McClure, shares many similarities with Jack Kerouac, right down to the type of notebook preferred for drafting poems, but her bohemian lifestyle did not prevent her from developing an expertise in early childhood development and parent education. In short, a comprehensive definition of "Beat" is impossible, but it is safe to say that the concerns of all the poets were marginal to mainstream life of the 1950s. Beat poetry, in other words, emerged in this space marked off by the marginal life of street people and bohemians on the one hand and an intense, ecumenical spirituality on the other.

A final factor to consider is that, despite appearances, Beat poetry did not spring spontaneously from the pages of Madison Avenue lifestyle magazines. Rather, the poetry of Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, Snyder, Kyger, di Prima, and Ferlinghetti emerged where and when it did because each of the poets involved had studiously prepared him- or herself. This preparation enabled each of the poets to build creatively on the foundations laid by their predecessors. Because literary San Francisco was so far ahead of the rest of the country and because the nation was gripped by the Cold War, the Beats were initially presented as an anomaly, a minor disruption of day-to-day life. However, a study of their works indicates that it is actually grounded in an extensive range of traditions. Ferlinghetti's academic background has already been mentioned. Ginsberg's own extensive reading is often overshadowed by his pronouncements in favor of spontaneous composition, but by his mid-20s he had already accumulated a tremendous knowledge of poetics and prosody. Gary Snyder developed a recognized expertise in Asian languages as well as ecology—the latter largely on his own since there was little attention paid to environmental issues in the 1940s and 1950s, when he came of age.

The specifics of all the Beat poets' training are as different as the poets themselves. Suffice it to say that each of them was generally more learned than the dominant media images of the period would indicate. However, the fact that the movement emerged in San Francisco owes much to the city itself. A poetry scene had already been established there primarily through the combined (although at times conflicting) efforts of Kenneth Rexroth, Josephine Miles (a scholar and poet at Berkeley), and the poet Ruth Witt-Diamant, who ran a reading series at San Francisco State College as early as the 1940s (decades before the vogue of public readings by poets reached the rest of the country); and, by 1953, Ferlinghetti had already established City Lights Bookstore. Before Ginsberg and Kerouac had even arrived on the scene from New York, San Francisco had already nurtured talented younger poets such as those just mentioned as well as William Everson, Robert Duncan, and Jack Spicer.

If Beat poetry can be said to have a specific origin in time and place, the birth of the Beat generation as a public force occurred with a poetry reading on 13 October 1955 at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. Allen Ginsberg had recently moved to Berkeley to pursue a graduate degree at the University of California. There he became acquainted with the established poets of the Bay Area as well as with younger writers, such as McClure, Snyder, Whalen, and Philip Lamantia. At Rexroth's urging, Ginsberg invited the other four poets to read at a former garage that had recently been converted to an art gallery. Rexroth served as a master of ceremonies that evening, while Jack Kerouac built the audience's enthusiasm by passing around a jug of wine. Each of the five poets read breakthrough work, culminating with the first public reading of Ginsberg's "Howl," which was soon to become famous. While none of the other poets attained quite the stature of Ginsberg in

terms of mass media exposure, each of them went on to a long, successful, and varied career in poetry. All of them, except Lamantia, retained a lifelong identification with the Beat generation.

Although the term "Beat" was not at the time in widespread public use, the New York poets associated with the term had been using it for years. In fact, novelist and Beat fellow traveler John Clellon Holmes had already published an article in the *New York Times Magazine* called "This Is the Beat Generation" (16 November 1952). While not specifically addressing literary developments (indeed, almost none of the major writers associated with the movement had even been published by this date), Holmes was the first to take the term public. In the late-1950s backlash against Ginsberg's *Howl, and Other Poems* (1956) and Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957), the name took on more sinister connotations, and the term "beatnik" became a national commonplace in several uncomplimentary articles and photo spreads treating a literary movement as a form of social deviance. Thus, a particular image of these poets took hold with the public, an image suggesting a lack of hygiene and a penchant for spewing forth words of detached pomposity to a roomful of snapping fingers and bongo drums. Caricatured on television in the form of the character Maynard G. Krebs on *The Life and Loves of Dobie Gillis,* the image of the beatnik overwhelmed the poetry written by the Beat generation. By 1960, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover could address the Republican National Convention declaring that the three major threats to national security were communism, homosexuality, and beatniks.

Despite this negative publicity (which of course attracted some positive attention from disaffiliated sectors of the public), the Beat poets continued to work and to engage the world through poetry. While the Beat movement coalesced in San Francisco in the early and middle 1950s, writers subsequently associated with the movement came from all over the United States. By the time *Howl, and Other Poems* was facing an obscenity trial in 1958, independent magazines had emerged in several cities, and previously disparate communities started to come together under one banner. In 1958, administrators at the University of Chicago censored an issue of the *Chicago Review* that featured Beat writings, so the magazine's graduate student editors Paul Carroll and Irving Rosenthal formed *Big Table* magazine. By 1961 in New York, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Diane di Prima published *Floating Bear,* and a year later Ed Sanders opened Peace Eye Bookstore and began publishing *Fuck You/A Magazine of the Arts.* Attention was also drawn to Los Angeles, which already featured an active scene revolving around Venice Beach, where Lawrence Lipton, Stuart Perkoff, and others had been publishing work and even performing poetry to jazz accompaniment for more than a decade. Lipton had published in 1959 a sociological essay called *The Holy Barbarians,* a book that gave the first full-length, inside account of the emerging bohemian movement as a national phenomenon. The interesting feature of Lipton's book is the historical dimension: while scenes were popping up all over the country where previously poetry was not part of daily life, Lipton traces the origin of these developments to the various bohemias of Paris, New York, and Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s. Lipton's probing account offers an interesting antidote to the superficial and misleading stories then appearing in the major news and style magazines and still goes a long way toward explaining the significance of Beat poetry. Historian John Arthur Maynard (1991) describes Lipton's Venice West scene and, for the most part, the social tendencies of the Beat poets in general when he writes, "They lived on subsistence incomes in the shabbiest part of town, held jobs no longer than they had to, and considered the sacrifice worth it if it freed them from the false values and phony satisfactions of conventional life. . . . Instead of amassing possessions and staring into the television set, they wrote poetry, painted pictures, made collages."

By the 1960s, the Beats were a global phenomenon. Ginsberg and Corso lived in the famous "Beat Hotel" in Paris, where they met poet Harold Norse and several other artists from Europe and the United States. Ginsberg appeared at political protests around the world and was even deported from Cuba and Czechoslovakia for his activities. In San Francisco, Snyder, Kyger, Ferlinghetti, and di Prima were often asked (and still are to this day) to contribute poems to gatherings on behalf of environmental and spiritual causes. At a time when American poetry became more and more associated with the classroom, the writers associated with the Beat generation would often place themselves and their poetry literally at the barricades. For this, they were criticized, and to be fair, the poetry sometimes (although not often) suffered. However, unlike mainstream poets, the Beat writers through the decades bravely faced dismissal from the established poets in order to make poetry a public art once again.

Interest in the Beat generation continues into the 21st century. While some of the leading practitioners have died, a few continue to publish innovative volumes of poetry. For example, the last decade of the 20th century saw the publication of the previously mentioned volumes by Snyder and di Prima as well as major collections by McClure, Corso, and Ted Joans. Courses devoted to the Beat writers are staples at many colleges and universities.

Scholarly attention is expanding as well. Much research is still directed at the major figures, such as Ginsberg, Corso, and Kerouac, but women and minority writers who contributed to the movement are also attracting sustained critical attention. For example, scholar Brenda Knight published an extensive anthology titled *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (1996). The next year saw publication of *A Different Beat: Writings by the Women of the Beat Generation* (Richard Peabody, editor, 1997). These books bring together hard-to-find writings by authors known and virtually unknown. These two anthologies are especially encouraging because there is almost no overlap in their contents, a fact that shows the tremendous energy and diversity of the women who have been all too often overlooked and that also suggests that there remain further discoveries for inquiring scholars. Indeed, as Ronna Johnson and Maria Damon (1999) characterize the contributions of the "skipped Beats," they "did not so much criticize mainstream American life as try to assert their places as artists and members of the Beat community. They were invisible as artists to their male peers, and are invisible today in the popular perception of the Beat era." Still, despite that invisibility, women writers have made major contributions to the understanding of Beat culture, primarily through memoirs, which Johnson and Damon acknowledge when they mention "popular interest in *Minor Characters* (by Joyce Johnson), Hettie Jones' *How I Became Hettie Jones,* Carolyn Cassady's *Off the Road,* Bonnie Bremser's *Troia: Mexican Memoirs,* and Diane di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik.*" However, as the authors conclude, recent scholars have shown, rightfully, that "there is a substantial Beat women's literature that goes beyond memoir."

A definitive history of poetry written by the Beat generation cannot yet be written largely because the work, as well as our understanding of it, continues to evolve. There will always be readers looking for poetry with the critical edginess that characterizes Beat writing, and since the work of many writers associated with the movement is ongoing, readers will not soon run out of the kinds of poems and poets that can change their lives. This latter feature, finally, is the defining characteristic of Beat writing: the power to change individual lives in ways that other contemporary poems and poets cannot. For this reason, the poetry of the Beat generation will continue to attract positive attention from its supporters and strong criticism from its detractors for quite some time.

DAVID R. ZAUHAR

See also Performance Poetry; San Francisco Renaissance

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Ben Belitt 1911–

Better known as a translator than as a poet, Ben Belitt has been celebrated by prestigious and loyal readers without attracting substantial fame or anthologization. His poems, published in only six volumes over the span of nearly 50 years, present an ornate, demanding language that his friend Howard Nemerov (1972) identified as "not only difficult but in other ways unfashionable." By this, Nemerov meant that Belitt's poetry, committed to precise description and a dizzying density of sound, requires not only close attention but also multiple careful readings; hard work, after all, is rarely popular. In poems such as "The Bathers: A Triptych," Belitt asks us to imagine "marinations, / emollients: Job in a sitzbad, / dipping the nib of his quill in the optics of Newton," as he describes David's painting of the dying Marat. Yet, as Nemerov and Robert Boyers (1973) remind us, there is great pleasure in this idiosyncrasy, these overlooked but "exquisite" lyrics.

Belitt's early life was tragic, although it figures only obliquely in his adult writings. His childhood in the care of Manhattan's Hebrew Orphan Asylum and his subsequent retrieval by his mother after six years appear in his autobiographical poem "The Orphaning" and in the prose memoir titled "From the Bookless World." (After his mother remarried, she brought Belitt to Lynchburg, Virginia, the home of her second husband; Belitt later attended the University of Virginia.)

Leaving graduate school in 1936 to become assistant literary editor at *The Nation,* Belitt moved from the romanticized Virginia of his adolescence directly into Manhattan's literary inner circles, mentored by Joseph Wood Krutch and Eda Lou Walton. Walton first introduced Belitt to the works of Hart Crane and Gerard Manley Hopkins: the deeply personal, intensely wrought dictions of both poets resonate still in Belitt's verse. Among his other duties at *The Nation,* Belitt reviewed a biography of Keats, already an important figure in his imaginative life, and three books by Wallace Stevens, whose consanguinity of "the logic and the music of the poem" (the phrase is from Belitt's 6 November 1937 review of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*) remains also a hallmark of Belitt's technique.

After two years in New York, Belitt moved to Bennington, Vermont, where he has lived since 1938 as a professor of literature at Bennington College. Working in the richly interdisciplinary and experimental atmosphere there, Belitt collaborated (or, as he wrote, "collided") with the legendary choreographer Martha Graham and with the scholar Wallace Fowlie, who first turned Belitt's attention to the translation of poems. Belitt produced his *Four Poems by Rimbaud: The Problem of Translation* (1947) because, in Belitt's words, "My knowledge of French was such that, although I could imagine what the tension and the weight of the idiom was in French, I could not get close enough to the excitement of the sound without touching it with English and, as Keats says, 'proving it on my own pulses.'" After these initial efforts on the French Modernists, Belitt was drawn to Federico García Lorca and the modern Spanish-language poetry that made his reputation: Antonio Machado, Eugenio Montale, Rafael Alberti, Jorge Luis Borges, and most significantly Pablo Neruda, who chose Belitt as his translator for several volumes of poetry. Belitt's trans-

lation of García Lorca's *Poet in New York* (1955) became the standard translation of that important text, and it has been suggested, although Belitt denies it, that this translation influenced Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) and the San Francisco Sound of the 1950s.

Belitt's method of translation honors imagination over literal fidelity. In his essays on translation in *Adam's Dream* (1978), he claims that the translator must preserve the "pleasure and not [the] truth" of the original poem. Translators, Belitt insists, cannot afford to believe in the "Incorruptible Form": translation is a "sweaty empiricism in which everything is . . . a choice." This epistemology of translation explicitly takes part in the metaphors of quantum physics—a "poetics of uncertainty" proven and driven by every semantic choice—and in his criticism Belitt invokes Werner Heisenberg as easily as S.T. Coleridge. In the essays of *The Forgèd Feature: Toward a Poetics of Uncertainty* (1995), he connects the quantum-physical "dynamics of uncertainty" to Keats' notion of "Negative Capability," making the translator (or poet) the one perceiver who can preserve (or imitate) the essential unresolvability of the actual world. As Belitt said in a 1999 internet interview, "The power of what a poem does is to make the thing more dubious."

The poets who seem most prominent in Belitt's personal canon are also the poets for whom this "poetics of uncertainty" seems most apt: Hart Crane; Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose work provides the titles for *The Double Witness* (1977) and *The Forgèd Feature;* and John Keats, whose spirit rises to confront Belitt in the powerful title poem of his collected works, *This Scribe, My Hand* (1998). In that great meditation, as the noise of traffic ("demotic with engines and klaxons") swirls around Keats' grave in Rome, Belitt finds himself overcome by the "murderous" violence of writing and the terrible silence of poetic anonymity. Seeing the places that Keats had seen in Rome, he begins to sense poetry as "a hashish of blood" on the palate, later slipping "on the blood and the ink / toward the exigent bed" where Keats died. Drawing on imagery as various as his high school botany lessons, the Russian film *Potemkin,* Sumerian cuneiform, street violence, and Wordsworth, Belitt revolves, like a man possessed, around Keats' proposed epitaph ("Here lies a man whose name was writ on water") and the poem's eventually terrifying refrain—terrifying because it carries with it the silence it implies—"*Nobody listens.*"

For a poet as skilled, as demanding, and as careful as Belitt, no fate could be less appropriate. By eschewing the fashionable for the difficult, by producing only at lengthy intervals, and by devoting his career to translation and teaching, Belitt has done little to court fame, although he has done much to deserve it.

ISAAC CATES

Biography

Born in New York City, 2 May 1911. Attended the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, B.A. 1932 (Phi Beta Kappa), M.A. 1934, 1934–36; served in the United States Army Infantry, 1942–44; editor-scenarist, Signal Corps Photographic Center Combat Film Section, 1945–46; assistant literary editor, *The Nation,* New York, 1936–37; since 1938 member of the English Department, and currently Professor of literature and languages, Bennington College, Vermont; taught at Mills College, Oakland, California, 1939, and Connecticut College, New London, 1948–49. Received Shelley Memorial Award, 1936; Guggenheim fellowship, 1946; Oscar Blumenthal Award, 1957, and Union League Civic and Arts Foundation Prize, 1960 (*Poetry,* Chicago); Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, 1962; National Institute of Arts and Letters Award, 1965; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1967; Russell Loines Award, 1981; Rockefeller Foundation grant, 1984; Williams/Derwood Award, 1986. Living in Bennington, Vermont.

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Stephen Vincent Benét 1898–1943

From 1928 with the publication of his verse epic *John Brown's Body* until his untimely passing in 1943, Stephen Vincent Benét was one of the most popular and beloved writers in the United States. The commercial success of his lyrical and dramatic history of the American Civil War was unprecedented and propelled Benét into the forefront of literary recognition, which he sustained with poetry, fiction, libretti, and radio scripts that tackled social issues such as the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism, and support for the Allied forces at the outset of World War II and then for the United States after Pearl Harbor. In addition, Benét's short story "The Devil and Daniel Webster" appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1937 and became an American legend. If Benét's good friend Archibald MacLeish could be described as an American Stoic, then Benét was an "American Visceral" who wore his heart on his pen.

Benét was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to Colonel James Walker and Frances Neill Benét. His parents were progressive, and his father was an expert in the appreciation of poetry. Stephen was the youngest of three children. His brother William and sister Laura also became poets and writers. Benét published his first book of verse, *Five Men and Pompey* (1915), at age 17, and it featured dramatic monologues by Roman figures. A penchant for the dramatic became a Benét standard. Benét attended Yale University and was recognized as a rising star by such future literary luminaries as Thornton Wilder (his Yale classmate and friend), Malcolm Cowley, John Peale Bishop, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. While at Yale, Benét published two more volumes of verse: *Young Adventure* (1918) and *Heavens and Earth* (1920). Both feature youthful exuberance and sonorously lyrical fluidity in a manner more 19th century than 20th. A strong influence on Benét's verse at this time was the poet Vachel Lindsay, whom Benét met twice at Yale. Lindsay was the first poet as performance artist, and his recitals were electrifying theatrical events.

With a master's degree earned from Yale in 1921, Benét ventured to Paris, where he met Rosemary Carr, who was as a journalist there for the *Chicago Tribune*. His courtship featured love poems that are cleverly playful. (In 1925, many of these were collected in *Tiger Joy*.) Stephen and Rosemary married in 1921, and she became his muse and moral compass. They would have three children, and their marriage was the great love story behind the rest of his life and work.

In New York City, Benét worked only as a writer. In 1922, he published the two long poems that marked the beginning of his poetic maturity. *The Ballad of William Sycamore* in *The New Republic* and *King David* in *The Nation* were a blend of style and substance that predicts the landmark epic still to come.

In the 1920s, Benét struggled to earn money as a writer. Although the poems in *Tiger Joy* (1925) received critical praise and comparisons to Thomas Hardy, Benét turned to fiction and drama for an income. In this regard, the poetic turning point for Benét was a Guggenheim fellowship earned in 1926, which meant that he would not have to worry about writing for an income. The Benéts returned to Paris, where the grant would stretch further. Benét spent the next two years writing *John Brown's Body*.

John Brown's Body (1928) was perhaps the first truly American verse epic and certainly the first of the 20th century. The 15,000 lines chronicle the five years of the Civil War with extended and well-defined portrayals of Brown, Lincoln, Lee, Davis, Grant, Jackson, and many others as well as fictional creations exemplifying composites of slaves, farmers, soldiers, and their families. While his epic has the classic structure of Homer and Virgil, the story, in all its Homeric detail, is unabashedly American. The book's release was highly anticipated. It made the front page of literary reviews alongside Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counterpoint* and took the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. *John Brown's Body* became a national bestseller and has never been out of print since. Benét's success encouraged contemporaries to try more poetic epics, novels in verse, and verse plays over the next 20 years, ranging from MacLeish's *Conquistador* (1932) to W.H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), also Pulitzer winners. Margaret Mitchell credited Benét's poem as the inspiration for *Gone with the Wind*.

Financial success was brief, as Benét lost all his income to the stock market crash. Once again he turned to prose to earn his way and became a master of the short story. He did not publish new verse again until collaborating with Rosemary on *A Book of Americans* (1933), a collection of children's poems about American themes and personas. In 1933, he became editor of the prestigious Yale Younger Poets series (his successor was Auden), and many of his choices became poets of international standing.

In 1936, Benét returned to adult verse with fury in *Burning City*. The Depression had motivated him to side with Franklin Roosevelt and against special interests. The poems, such as " Ode to Walt Whitman," are written in declamatory and very modern free verse. There are also early concerns about Fascism a year before the Spanish Civil War caught everyone's attention. Already respected and popular when *The Devil and Daniel Webster* appeared in 1937, Benét became an influential public figure and a writer for democracy. In 1940, the antifascist poem "Nightmare at Noon" was published in *Life* magazine and became a national sensation. Benét wrote radio plays that were heard by millions of Americans every week. Benét, only 44, died in March 1943 from a heart attack. *Western Star*, a planned verse epic about the settling of America, was not completed; nonetheless, the book-length opening sections were published posthumously and won Benét a second Pulitzer Prize in 1944.

Benét's work has been reprinted in anthologies regularly since 1943, and *John Brown's Body* ensures his continued place alongside the important American poets of the 20th century.

DAVID GARRETT IZZO

Biography

Born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 22 July 1898. Attended Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (Chairman, *Yale Literary Magazine*, 1918), 1915–18, 1919–20, A.B. 1919, M.A. 1920; the Sorbonne, Paris, 1920–21; worked for the State Department, Washington, D.C., 1918; worked for advertising agency, New York, 1919; lecturer and radio propagandist for the liberal cause, 1930s and early 1940s; editor, Yale Younger Poets series. Received Poetry Society of America Prize, 1921; Guggenheim fellowship, 1926; Pulitzer Prize, 1929, 1944; O. Henry Award, 1932, 1937, 1940; Shelley Memorial Award, 1933; American Academy Gold Medal, 1943; Member, 1929, and Vice President, National Institute of Arts and Letters. Died 13 March 1943.

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Charles Bernstein 1950–

A seminal figure in the development and practice of Language poetry in the 1970s and 1980s, Charles Bernstein has emerged as a prominent and prolific poet of late-20th-century American poetics. As co-editor with Bruce Andrews of the influential small magazine called $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, Bernstein helped shape the climate of a radical poetics that emerged in the early 1970s, centered in New York City and San Francisco. Along with other journals, such as *Hills, Tottels, Poetics Journal,* and *This,* the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine was a collection of statements on poetics, poems, theoretical ideas, and extracts from pertinent theorists that disseminated a broad range of literary and extraliterary ideas to like-minded practicing writers. Now with more than 20 books of poetry and three collections of essays published with such presses as Sun and Moon, Harvard University Press, and the University of Chicago Press, Bernstein is David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the State University of New York at Buffalo, from where he has continued to make a significant impact on the development of contemporary poetry in the United States.

As with many of the Language poets, the issues of comprehension and representation figure large in Bernstein's work. His poetry edges tentatively toward sense, gesturing to an unease about the production of meaning, to the contract of reference in communication that somehow gets broken in the saying. He is interested in interruption and a poetics of constellation, a practice that he describes in his essay "Semblance" (1981) as "working at angles to the strong tidal pull of an unexpected sequence of a sentence—or by cutting off a sentence or a phrase midway and counting on the mind to complete where the poem goes off in another direction, giving two vectors at once—the anticipated projection underneath and the actual wording above." For example, his poetry substitutes syllables or letters to produce unexpectedly different signifiers in familiar phrasal constructions ("Would you do me the flavor of buying that sty?"), as in Bernstein's poem "Outrigger" in *The Sophist* (1987). The same impulse has also produced an investigation into alternative syntactical structures and their effect on meaning and opening up the links between temporality and language. Upsetting the rules of conventional grammar, Bernstein practices "scissoring / the syntax of language (that is, cutting / *against* expected breaks of the / grammatical phrase or unit of / breath" (*My Way,* 1999).

Elsewhere, Bernstein has shown a marked interest in the preoccupations of the "Objectivist" poetics of Louis Zukofsky, especially the interest in sound. Introducing a collection of "Language" writing in *The Paris Review,* Bernstein pointedly remarks on the characteristic attention given to the *sound* of words:

> Hints, then, of a writing that takes as its medium, or domain of intention, every *articulable* aspect of language. It's as if a new scanning of consciousness were possible by introduction of the *music* of its constituting. And by this means to make *audible* the thinking field: to get access to the lens (the mixed metaphor is again ideology) through which the world's meanings are formed into *audibilities.* ("Language Sampler," collected in Bernstein, *Content's Dream* [1986], italics added)

Bernstein continues, describing the writing as a "multimodal process," which while questioning the ideologies inherent in conventional syntax, simultaneously lays claim to

> a syntax—to put it indefensibly—of pure music, of absolute attention to the ordering of sound's syllables. . . . Not that this is "lyric" poetry, insofar as that term may assume a musical, or metric, *accompaniment* to the words: the music

> rather is built into the sequence of the words' tones, totally saturating the texts' sound. "Indefensibly," that is, because there really is no pure music any more than there is a pure language since any material practice becomes itself a mode. (*Content's Dream*)

Bernstein concludes his introduction by speaking about the music of language as a "resonating of the wordness of language" (*Content's Dream*). These remarks directly confront the trends in which language is increasingly being seen to be *unsound,* the mixed metaphor here informing the whole of Bernstein's irony.

Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations into language frequently and persistently return to the role of sound in language as meaning (or misunderstanding—i.e., not hearing). Deeply indebted to this philosopher, this is a factor that Bernstein is at pains to emphasize in his own work:

> In*hear*ing in a poetics of vision or reflection (as if to counter a visualist frame of reference in these terms) is a poetics of sound. Words returned to a sonorousness that does not require the validity of fixed images, of sight and in sight, nor deny its common roots with visibility. (*Content's Dream*)

There is an unequivocal break here with any secret desire for the primacy of the eye, or the object-oriented, reifying vision evident in earlier Modernist poetics. The multiplicity brought about by a return to the sonority of words is a mosaic not only of images but of the senses as well. Sight based on the eye/I is singular in its isolation of "reality," and by resorting to sight, perceptions are compartmentalized and hierarchized, and the indivisible individual rests on "other" divisions. The experiments with language by recent avant-garde writers reveal that resonances are dissonances, not harmonies. Yet these multiplicities are felt to be an enrichment rather than a disordered chaos in language:

> Polyvalences and polysyllables occurring overall throughout the poem create a music of the text, a music that has to do with the rhyming/comparing/vectoring of possible meanings, creating *chords* of the simultaneous vectors of the several interpretations of each poly-entendre, and with the combination of these chords with other chords, durationally, in the sequence of the writing, and simultaneously, in the overall structure. The overall "sound" of the work is actually more important to listen for than the linear prosodic sequences, since the relation of the "chords" reinforces the sound resonances and echoes creating an intense overall vibration that adds a dynamic of dimensional depth to the sound of any given linear movement. (*Content's Dream*)

Bernstein emphasizes the "music of the text," which occurs in the vectoring potential of words, setting up resonances through a matrix of semantic possibility. Hence the insistent emphasis on *hearing* that pervades his poetics: the basis for understanding as a matter of echoes, repercussions, and sounds that vibrate or resonate only at certain accidental moments. Bernstein perceives music as nodes of meaning in much the same sense as mordents, "tune being the variety of ways meaning congeals, not so much as a plotted act of creation but rather, retrospectively, as the accumulation of occurrences, occurrences being non-systematic formations, accidents in the literal sense" (*Content's Dream*). The string of chords that weaves the dynamic texture of the language exists in the movement, repetition, alteration, and improvisation of sounds.

Bernstein constantly emphasizes that language does not operate in an isolated, self-contained sphere but in an interactive social sphere. The fact that "language speaks" forces or prompts a response: indeed, the very understanding of words engages people in a hearing of sounds that are *culturally* induced. Thus, in his important verse essay "Artifice of Absorption," Bernstein draws a distinction between poetry that is "absorptive" ("rhapsodic, spellbinding, / mesmerizing, hypnotic, total, riveting, / enthralling") and poetry that is "impermeable" ("artifice, boredom, / exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction, digression, interruptive, transgressive") (*A Poetics,* 1992). In other words, Bernstein argues that poetry that is absorptive depends on realism, transparency, and continuity, whereas the anti-absorptive is characterized by the artificial, the opaque, and discontinuous. Rather than being seduced by a text of romantic affirmation, Bernstein uses radical formal experimentation and "opaque and non-absorbable elements" (*A Poetics*) to force the reader into participating in the process of constituting the text's meaning. Thus, poems such as "eLecTrIc" in *Poetic Justice* (1979) or "Like DeCLAraTionS in a HymIE CEMetArY" in *The Sophist* use capital letters to interrupt and disrupt the textual line, producing an intensity and rhythmic energy in the process. On other occasions, the text is left deliberately open, inviting the reader to add to the text as a participating "author," as in many of the poems in *Controlling Interests* (1980). Elsewhere, Bernstein puts together a patchwork of different discourses, encouraging the reader to make any bridging connections or metaphorical analogies, as, for example, in this extract from "The Klupzy Girl":

> Sense of variety: panic. Like
> my eye takes over from the front
> yard, three pace. Idle gaze—years
> right down the window. Not clairvoyance,
> predictions, deciphering—enacting. Analytically,
> i.e., thoughtlessly. Begin to push and cue
> together. Or I originate out of this
> occurrence, stoop down, bend on. The
> Protest-ant's voice within, calling for
> this to be shepherded, for moment's
> expression's enthroning. Able to be
> alibied (contiguity of vacuity). Or
> do you think you can communicate
> telepathetically? Verena read the epistle
> with much deliberateness. If we are
> not to be phrasemongers, we must
> sit down and take the steps that will
> give these policies life. I fumbled clumsily
> with the others—the evocations, explanations,
> glossings of "reality" seemed like stretching
> it to cover ground rather than make
> or name or push something through. (*Islets/Irritations,* 1983)

This is a passage from a poem that uses found material, parodies of other literary genres, and an effacement of the writing self to interrogate the failures and weaknesses of realism as a literary

mode. One can read the poem as embedding within itself a self-reflexive commentary on how to read. The "sense of variety" equated with "panic" is the result of a poetry that does not "fit" an accepted sameness, of a multiplicity of othernesses and differences upsetting received aesthetic forms. The poem rejects transparency and interpretive forecasts for the performative dimension, or "enacting." That is, the poem requires analytic reading but redefines this as "thoughtless" reading, or not using preformulated ideas and models. Rather than "shepherding" language as an expression of an epiphanic moment and intuiting the meaning "telepathetically," the poem obstructs this by disjunction, disconnection, and disfiguration, forcing deliberation. If we are to *read* a text rather then merely collude with prepared aesthetic significances and judgments, then we have to accept language as a series of duplicities and multiplicities rather than singularities and univocalities. The section finishes with a critique of the realist conception of language as merely a hypnotic veneer of words on the world that precludes a sincere investigative attempt to "name or push something through."

It is evident from "The Klupzy Girl" that the conventional expressivist self of romantic poetry has been erased and that the poem does not resort to the "I" as the final point of reference. The poem focuses principally on writing as a production of meanings, a process that seeks to engage the reader in the construction of the text rather than allowing words to be registered or heard passively. Bernstein's poetry continually asks one to read *writing* rather than *meanings,* interrogating the construction of the text as much as the words themselves. The "exchange" of meaning is an active process instead of a static paradigm of rules. It is to write with what Bernstein describes as "a recharged use of the multivalent referential vectors that any word has," showing reference to be not "a one-to-one relation to an 'object' but a perceptual dimension . . . [that] roams over the range of associations suggested by the word" (Andrews and Bernstein, editors, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book,* 1984).

Bernstein's poetic strategy is often one of defamiliarization, as the opening lines of "The Klupzy Girl" indicate:

> Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference:
> it brings you to your senses. (*Islets/Irritations*)

This strategy of defamiliarization reorients language through the blockage of flow and exchange, thereby throwing a spanner in the works of semantic circulation, urging poetry as a practice of "anticonformity": "I care most for poetry that disrupts business as usual, including literary business: I care most for poetry as dissent, including formal dissent; poetry that makes sounds possible to be heard that are not otherwise articulated" (*A Poetics*). Bernstein's allegiance is to a poetics that approaches otherness without subsuming it: "Poetry can, even if it doesn't, throw a wedge into this engineered process of social derealization: find a middle ground of care in particulars, in the truth of details and their constellations—provide a site for the construction of social and imaginative facts and configurations avoided or overlooked elsewhere" (*A Poetics*). Inevitably, this propels that poet more "outward, centrifugally, to the unknown and peripheral, than toward a constant centripetal regrouping and reshoring through official verse culture's enormously elastic and sophisticated mechanism of tokenization that targets, splits off, and decontextualizes; essentializing the mode of difference and incorporating the product (never the process) into its own cultural space" (*A Poetics*).

As Bernstein has said of his poetic practice, "I prefer the wrong way—anything better than the well-wrought epiphany of predictable measure—for at least the cracks and flaws and awkwardnesses show signs of real life" (*A Poetics*). That errant way produces a sort of glimpse of another social structure, another sexual ideology, another life world, through the current language of the day. To this degree, Bernstein's poetry poses an alternative to a coercive moral absolutism on the one hand and to an inchoate postmodernist relativism on the other.

TIM WOODS

See also Language Poetry

Biography

Born in New York City, 4 April 1950. Attended Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968–72, A.B. in philosophy 1972 (Phi Beta Kappa); Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia (King fellow), 1973–74; writer on medical and health topics; Visiting Lecturer, University of Auckland, 1986, and University of California, San Diego, 1987; Visiting Professor, Queens College, City University of New York, 1988; faculty member and series coordinator, Wolfson Center for National Affairs, New School for Social Research, New York, 1988; Lecturer in Creative Writing Program, Princeton University, New Jersey, 1989 and 1990; Visiting Butler Chair Professor, 1989, and since 1990 David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters, State University of New York, Buffalo; editor, with Bruce Andrews, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,* New York, 1978–81, and of poetry anthologies for *Paris Review,* 1982, and *Boundary 2,* 1987. Received National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, 1980; Guggenheim fellowship, 1985; University of Auckland Foundation fellowship, 1986; New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship, 1990. Living in New York City.

Poetry

Asylums, 1975
Parsing, 1976
Shade, 1978
Poetic Justice, 1979
Senses of Responsibility, 1979
Legend (with others), 1980
Controlling Interests, 1980
Disfrutes, 1981
The Occurrence of Tune (photographs by Susan Bee Laufer), 1981
Stigma, 1981
Islets/Irritations, 1983
Resistance, 1983
Amblyopia, 1985
Veil, 1987
The Sophist, 1987
Four Poems, 1988
The Nude Formalism, 1989
The Lives of the Toll Takers, 1990
Rough Trades, 1990
The Absent Father in Dumbo, 1990
Dark City, 1994

Log Rhythms, 1998
My Way: Speeches and Poems, 1999
Republics of Reality: Poems, 1975–1995, 2000

Other Writings: essays (*A Poetics*, 1992), translations of French literature.

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Ted Berrigan 1934–83

In 25 years of writing, Ted Berrigan created a poetry that melded intelligence, emotion, and wit in unexpected ways, a poetry of what he calls in Sonnet LIII "baffling combustions." Berrigan's poetry can be at once dazzlingly opaque and utterly clear, full of dense verbal collage and unashamed sentiment, blatantly appropriative yet singularly original. Although typically identified as a poet of the New York School, Berrigan also pronounced himself "a late beatnik," and his work indeed encompasses multiple possibilities in the New American Poetry, veering from painterly abstraction to the "I do this I do that" mode of Frank O'Hara to expansive autobiographical statements of great pathos. His sense of poetic form is also surprising in its variety: while a poem such as "Tambourine Life" suggests the open-field poetics of Black Mountain, with the poem taking shape in the act of composition, its form an extension of its content, Berrigan was also a profoundly radical formalist who took on the unlikely project of reanimating the sonnet and who suggested that it may also be true that content is an extension of form.

It was Berrigan's radical formalism that established him as a poet in *The Sonnets* (1964), first published by his own "C" Press. While Berrigan's avowed intention to become "big" by means of a sonnet sequence might seem naive in retrospect, his approach to sonnet form drew on important currents in modern and postmodern art and writing. As he explained in a 1978 interview, "My technical achievement in *The Sonnets* was to conceive the sonnet as fourteen units of one line each," and he often described the poems in terms of blocks and bricks, the poet building the poem unit by unit. Berrigan's investigation of the possibilities of discontinuous form was influenced by the fractured surfaces of Cubist collage, the line-by-line shifts of Guillaume Apollinaire's poem "Lundi Rue Christine" (a Berrigan favorite), the cut-up texts of William Burroughs, the chance operations of John Cage, and the use of found materials in writing and visual art, particularly in John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) and the work of Marcel Duchamp. *The Sonnets* in fact began with found materials, as Berrigan made the first poems of what became the sequence by going through his own failed poems and choosing lines intuitively to make oblique, suggestive collages. The sequence also freely appropriates from Ashbery, O'Hara, Rilke, Rimbaud, and Shakespeare, among others, with lines quoted, translated, or transliterated to add distinctive tones. Much of the art of *The Sonnets*, however, lies in Berrigan's own tonal brilliance, particularly his use of repetition to make bits of language into resonant motifs: "feminine marvelous and tough," "my dream a white tree," "Dear Chris, hello."

What distinguishes *The Sonnets* from much postmodern writing is an insistence on the presence of an individual imagination and a feeling, perceiving self within the text. As Alice Notley (1999) observes, "*The Sonnets* is not, as is sometimes stated, concerned with the rejection of the 'psychological I.'" Berrigan often spoke of "I" as a character within his poems: here an "I" records events and complications among itself, friends, and lovers, sometimes in individual lines that become parts of an overall texture, sometimes in entire poems, as in Sonnet XXXVI, which seems both homage to and parody of Frank O'Hara. *The Sonnets* ends with a remarkable claim of poetic selfhood: Sonnet LXXXVIII, "A Final Sonnet," reprises motifs from the sequence, moves on to borrow (and relineate) Prospero's renunciation of magic in *The Tempest*, and ends in a moment of direct address, "Dear Chris, hello," suggesting that even in the absence of magic and other voices, the poet is able to continue speaking.

In the years following *The Sonnets*, Berrigan published with numerous small poet-run presses, and he became an inspiring figure amid the writing community associated with the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church on Manhattan's Lower East Side. He made numerous collaborative works, most notably with artists Joe Brainard and George Schneeman and poet Ron Padgett. *Bean Spasms* (1967), a volume whose title suggests its general atmosphere of intellectual high jinks, collects many Berrigan-Padgett collaborations. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Berrigan's own poetry came to dwell increasingly on his daily life circumstances. His poems pay tribute to friends and lovers and heroes ("People Who Died"), record difficulties with ill health and poverty ("Today's News"), and find their scenes in different places on the visiting-professor circuit ("Today in Ann Arbor"). "Tambourine Life" and "Things to Do in Providence" are among Berrigan's finest poems of dailiness, with moments of hilarity and unexpected sadness. Poems such as "Soviet Souvenir" and "Peking" from the sequence "Easter Monday" return to the dense collages of *The Sonnets*. Berrigan's work in the 1970s also includes autobiographical statements, such as "Red Shift," whose fierce, eloquent claims to an abiding presence in the world are all the more moving in light of

the poet's ill health: "Alone & crowded, unhappy fate, nevertheless / I slip softly into the air / The world's furious song flows through my costume."

In his final years, Berrigan discovered a new possibility for a radically formalist poetry: the poems of his final writing project, *500 American Postcards,* were handwritten on postcards. Berrigan regarded the postcard as a form, a fixed space determining (along with the variable of handwriting) the size of the poem. The resulting poems range from very brief postcard-like messages ("Angst" and "Salutation") to short poems of opaque lyrical beauty ("Paris, Frances" and "Buenos Aires"). A selection of poems from this project was published after Berrigan's death as *A Certain Slant of Sunlight* (1988). The title poem is one of Berrigan's finest, an ekphrasis of a photograph, and a poignant recollection of his mother and his childhood.

In the years since his death, interest in Berrigan's poetry has grown tremendously. Much of his work has come back into print, together with new volumes of interviews and talks, and Berrigan has been the subject of memoirs, critical essays, a volume of homage, and an annotated checklist of publications. As the poet Anne Waldman has said, "Ted is back" (Fischer, 1998). In his formal and tonal innovations, in his emotional range and humor, Ted Berrigan remains a unique presence in postmodern American poetry.

MICHAEL LEDDY

See also New York School

Biography

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, 15 November 1934. Attended University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, B.A. 1959, M.A. 1962; served in United States Army, 1954–57; founded "C" Press and "C" magazine, 1963; teacher, St. Mark's Poetry Project, New York City, 1966–67; visiting lecturer, Writers' Workshop, University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1968–69; teacher, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1969, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1970, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1970, Essex University, England, 1973–74, Stevens Technical Institute, Hoboken, New Jersey, 1980, and Naropa Institute (now University), Boulder, Colorado, 1970s and 1980s; poet-in-residence, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, 1969–76, and City College of the City University of New York, 1982; member, board of advisors, St. Mark's Poetry Project. Received Poetry Foundation Award, 1964. Died in New York City, 4 July 1983.

Poetry

A Lily for My Love: 13 Poems, 1959
The Sonnets, 1964; revised editions, 1967, 1982, 2000
Bean Spasms (with Ron Padgett), 1967
Living with Chris, 1968
Many Happy Returns, 1969
Doubletalk (with Anselm Hollo), 1969
In the Early Morning Rain, 1970
Memorial Day (with Anne Waldman), 1971
The Drunken Boat, 1974
A Feeling for Leaving, 1975
Red Wagon, 1976
Nothing for You, 1977
Train Ride, 1978
Carrying a Torch, 1980
So Going around Cities: New and Selected Poems, 1958–1979, 1980
In a Blue River, 1981
The Morning Line, 1982
A Certain Slant of Sunlight, 1988
Selected Poems, 1994
Great Stories of the Chair, 1998

Other Writings: novel (*Clear the Range,* 1977), plays (*Seventeen* [with Ron Padgett], 1964), memoir (*Back in Boston Again* [with Tom Clark and Ron Padgett], 1972), talks and interviews (*Talking in Tranquility: Interviews with Ted Berrigan,* 1991; *On the Level Everyday: Selected Talks on Poetry and the Art of Living,* 1997).

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Wendell Berry 1934–

An accomplished essayist, fiction writer, and poet since the mid-1950s, Wendell Berry has explored one central theme in virtually all his writing, regardless of the genre: the interconnectedness of nature and culture, particularly as manifested in agriculture. Berry's poetry has attracted a loyal readership since the late 1960s and has garnered critical attention since the early 1970s. The emergence of ecocriticism in the 1990s strengthened Berry's literary standing. Although a friend of several Beat writers, Berry rejected the Beat movement's emphasis on stylistic experimentation, intellectual esotericism, and individualism. Some critics have compared Berry's poetry to that of Gary Snyder, who has similarly championed community and who has likewise explored the interrelationship between humans and the natural world. Berry's worldview, however, has remained for the most part solidly grounded in Western cultural tradition; he has not embraced Eastern philosophies as fully as Snyder.

Wendell Erdman Berry was born in Henry County, Kentucky, to parents who both hailed from longtime Henry County farm families. His father, an attorney and advocate for small-scale farming, left a promising political career in Washington, D.C., in the 1920s to return to his native county. This foreshadowed Wendell Berry's own mid-1960s decision to settle in Henry County rather than in the urban centers of art, academia, and political influence. The Depression-era environment in which Berry was raised, a landscape of self-sufficient family farms bordered by heavily forested river valleys, resembled pioneer days; at an early age he learned to value traditional rural community life. Much of his work is set in the Kentucky countryside between the World Wars, and his nonfiction frequently reflects upon the predicament of agricultural folkways and traditional rural wisdom in the postwar prosperity.

Initially an undisciplined student who preferred outdoor activities over formal education, Berry matured rapidly as a writer, first winning collegiate literary contests, then placing poems and short stories in local and national publications, and finally receiving a Wallace Stegner fellowship at Stanford University (1958–59). Shortly thereafter Berry won a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship (1961–62) and *Poetry* magazine's Vachel Lindsay Prize (1962). His first published book, *November Twenty-Six, Nineteen Hundred Sixty-Three* (1964), consisted of just one poem, an elegy for recently slain President John F. Kennedy. Most of the poems in Berry's breakthrough volume, *The Broken Ground* (1964), evoke the universality of rural life and reveal the stylistic traits found in much of his early poetry: commonplace and occasionally archaic language; generalized, often overtly symbolic nature imagery; and a quietly prophetic, wizened persona. *Openings* (1968) combines protest poems such as "Against the War in Vietnam" with poems that reflect his deepening interest in local history, such as "My Great-Grandfather's Slaves." That volume also includes Berry's widely anthologized lyric poem "The Peace of Wild Things," in which the poet lauds the spiritual blessings possible for receptive humans in the natural world. *Findings* (1969) is comprised of three long poems that explore the psychological role of old houses—and by metaphorical extension, human history—in the lives of their occupants. Berry writes,

> Love has visualized a house,
> and out of its expenditure
> fleshed the design
> at this cross ways
> of consciousness and time. . . .

The focal point of *Farming: A Hand Book* (1970) is a group of related poems narrated by Berry's "Mad Farmer" persona, celebrating the organic and often radical vision of farmers. *The Country of Marriage* (1973) concerns relationships. Some of that volume's poems are overtly sentimental; for instance, "Kentucky River Junction," dedicated to author Ken Kesey, typifies Berry's career-long penchant for paying tribute to his personal friendships publicly via published poems. Two of that volume's other poems, "At a Country Funeral" and the title poem (an ode to the institution of marriage), convey the complexity of human relationships without sentimentality. The descriptive and didactic poems in *Clearing* (1977) are artfully constructed meditations on the meaning of place and the past:

> All the lives this place
> has had, I have. I eat
> my history day by day.

A Part (1980) addresses a wide range of themes, including love, relationships, history, farming, and politics. Two poems, acknowledging Berry's growing literary reputation, admonish followers and imitators to "stay home." *The Wheel* (1982) illuminates the Hindu/Buddhist concept of the mandala (the Wheel of Life) by chronicling in various poems significant stages of human life (birth, coming of age, marriage, middle years of hard work and responsibility, old age, and death). *Collected Poems, 1957–1982* (1985) gathers all the poems written through 1982 that Berry claimed he would "care to have reread."

By the 1980s Berry was demonstrating a heightened commitment to poetic form. Whereas much of his early poetry could be characterized as *vers libre*, Berry's poems in *Sabbaths* (1987), *Sabbaths, 1987–1990* (1992), and *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979–1997* (1998) employ traditional forms, regularly metered lines, and rhyme. Thematically, the "Sabbaths" volumes constitute Berry's sustained effort to reconcile perceived polarities in Western thought (heaven versus earth, humanity versus the natural world, Christian theology versus modern science).

In *Entries* (1994), his principal volume of new poetry published during the 1990s, Berry reinterprets familiar themes (death, love, relationships, nature, spirituality, and work) while also revealing a new inclination on his part toward Orientalism ("Noguchi Fountain") and Confessionalism ("To My Mother"). *The Selected Poetry of Wendell Berry* (1998) offers an overview of his life's work in poetry through the late 1990s. In 1994 Berry received the prestigious T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing.

TED OLSON

Biography

Born in Henry County, Kentucky, 5 August 1934. Attended the University of Kentucky, Lexington, A.B. 1956, M.A. 1957; Stanford University, California (Stegner Fellow), 1958–59; taught at Stanford University, 1959–60, and New York University; member of the English Department, University of Kentucky, 1964–77, and 1987–94; starting in 1977 staff

member, Rodale Press, Emmaus, Pennsylvania. Received Guggenheim fellowship, 1961; Vachel Lindsay Prize, 1962; Rockefeller fellowship, 1965; Bess Hokin Prize (*Poetry*, Chicago), 1967; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1969; T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing, 1994; Aiken Taylor Award, 1995. Living in Port Royal, Kentucky.

Poetry
November Twenty-Six, Nineteen Hundred Sixty-Three, 1964
The Broken Ground, 1964
Openings, 1968
Findings, 1969
Farming: A Hand Book, 1970
The Country of Marriage, 1973
Clearing, 1977
A Part, 1980
The Wheel, 1982
Collected Poems, 1957–1982, 1985
Sabbaths, 1987
Sabbaths, 1987–1990, 1992
Entries, 1994
The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry, 1998
A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979–1997, 1998

Selected Criticism
Standing by Words, 1983

Other Writings: short stories, novels, essays, biography (*Harlan Hubbard: Life and Work*, 1990).

Further Reading
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Triggs, Jeffrey Alan, "Moving the Dark to Wholeness: The Elegies of Wendell Berry," *Literary Review* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1988)
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John Berryman 1914–72

"I am a half-closed book," John Berryman wrote in "Dream Song 159," reflecting on the complicated relationship between life and art that lies at the center of much of his writing. With large sections of his work dominated by the themes of dispossession and loss, absence and betrayal, and survival and recovery, Berryman's writing is often difficult to separate from a disturbing autobiographical impulse and, indeed, from the myths that have surrounded him since, if not long before, his death by suicide at the age of 57 in 1972. This has meant that Berryman's claim that "I am not writing an autobiography-in-verse, my friends" from the poem "Message" (*Love and Fame*, 1970) has seldom been taken very seriously by his critics. Berryman was a contemporary and acquaintance of other middle-generation or Confessional poets, including Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and Theodore Roethke, and Berryman scholars have rarely disputed the assumptions that have allowed this group of writers to be represented as America's midcentury *poètes maudits*.

A poet frequently obsessed with nomenclature and naming in his work, Berryman was born John Allyn Smith on 25 October 1914 in McAlester, Oklahoma. In the early 1920s, his family moved from Oklahoma, finally settling in 1925 in Tampa, Florida, where a year later the poet's father would die in mysterious circumstances (Giroux, 1996). Ten weeks later, Berryman's mother married John Angus McAlpin Berryman, and the family moved to Jackson Heights, New York City; it was at this time that he became John Allyn McAlpin Berryman, although his name was not legally changed until 1936. Berryman entered Columbia College in 1932, where he became acquainted with his future publisher, Robert Giroux, and the writers Thomas Merton and E.M. Halliday. Under the patronage and encouragement of Mark Van Doren, Berryman excelled at Columbia and published his first poems and reviews in *The Columbia Review* (then edited by Giroux) in 1935. In 1936, he had his first publication in a national magazine when "Notes on E.A. Robinson" was published in *The Nation*. In the same year, after graduating Phi Beta Kappa with an English major and a philosophy minor, Berryman was awarded a Euretta J. Kellett scholarship to study for two years at Clare College, Cambridge.

In many respects, Berryman's time at Cambridge was a period of passionate apprenticeship when, as he later admitted, he wished not only to resemble but also "to be" W.B. Yeats (*The Freedom of the Poet*, 1976). It was hardly surprising, then, that when Berryman's poems appeared alongside those of Mary Bernard, Randall Jarrell, W.R. Moses, and Marion O'Donnell in *Five Young American Poets* (1940) they were criticized for their obsessive use of Yeatsian imagery and tone, as is evident in such pieces as "Meditation," "The Curse," and "Ceremony and Vision."

Nevertheless, Berryman's time at Cambridge afforded him valuable introductions to the London literary world and to the work of writers such as Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice, and W.H. Auden, with whom he would develop an important intertextual dialogue in his own early work. Significant to note also is the fact that while at Cambridge, Berryman became the first American scholar to win the prestigious Oldham Shakespeare Prize, an early acknowledgment of his later contribution to Shakespeare scholarship. Berryman recalled many of the experiences and personalities of his two-year stint at Cambridge in the first three sections of his 1970 collection *Love and Fame*. In the intervening 30 years, however, between his return to the United States in 1938 and the publication of his major work, *The Dream Songs*, in 1969, Berryman moved impressively away from the overbearing Yeatsian tenor of his early efforts, writing works of radical thematic originality and rare technical brilliance, expanding our idea of the modern long poem while simultaneously examining and evaluating the nature and expression of personal and national origins and limits in poetry.

In the year of his return to the United States from England, Berryman published poems in *The Southern Review*, then edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. As part-time poetry editor of *The Nation* in 1939 and 1940, he befriended the poet Delmore Schwartz, to whose "sacred memory" he would later dedicate the last four books of *The Dream Songs*, published as *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* in 1968. Throughout the 1940s, in a decade he once termed "the decade of survival," Berryman taught at Wayne State, Harvard, and Princeton Universities, although he was also unemployed for long periods during this time. Classified 4-F for the draft because of poor eyesight and a diagnosis of petit mal, Berryman's first individual collection, the New Directions pamphlet *Poems*, was published in 1942, the same year he married Eileen Mulligan (later Eileen Simpson), novelist and author of the important memoir *Poets in Their Youth* (1982). Criticism of his early work, however, instilled in Berryman a deep desire to move away from his earlier influences. Signs of his success in achieving a new style were evident in some of the poems of his first major collection, *The Dispossessed*, which was published in 1948. Nevertheless, although *The Dispossessed* contained important and original pieces, such as "Winter Landscape," "The Ball Poem," and "Desire Is a World by Night," Berryman's work was still clearly affected by the metrical and imagistic examples of his early masters, and only a handful of poems (the nine songs of the "The Nervous Songs" sequence being the most significant) achieved true originality of style and tone. Those few poems, as Randall Jarrell wrote at the time of the book's publication, signaled the beginning of an important change of direction in the development of Berryman's early work, a change that Jarrell (for one) looked forward to "with real curiosity and pleasure" (see Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden and Co.*, 1980).

No one could have foreseen what Berryman was in fact already working on for over a year when *The Dispossessed* was published in 1948. *The Dispossessed* had shown Berryman to be a serious and able verbal technician, a master of poetic diction and form in the lyric voice and mode. In 1947 and 1948, however, Berryman began work on two projects that would help establish him as a major original poet of his time. *Berryman's Sonnets*, or *Sonnets to Chris*, is a sequence of 117 sonnets that Berryman began composing in 1947; although it was not published until 1967, this sequence may be read retrospectively as a clear indication of the advent of Berryman's unique voice in the late 1940s. More important, however, is the example of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, which Berryman began writing in 1948 and, when it was first published in *The Partisan Review* in 1953, was hailed by Edmund Wilson as "the most distinguished long poem by an American since *The Waste Land*." When *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* was finally published in book form in 1956, Wilson's praise was repeated by many of America's finest and most respected contemporary literary critics, from Conrad Aiken to Robert Fitzgerald. In the context of the trajectory of Berryman's career, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* marks his relatively late discovery of an individual style. With *Homage*, however, Berryman made a unique contribution to the development of American poetry in the 20th century. The poem's importance lies not only in Berryman's masterful use of syntax and voice and in his brilliant handling of the long poem form; it also heralded a radical and imaginative reappraisal of the entire American poetic tradition, interrogating the issue of national origins by presenting the figure of the 17th-century Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet as a peculiar (and precarious) founding mother, with whose phantom Berryman charts a difficult but passionate affair in the course of the poem.

In 1955, encouraged by the universally positive reception given to *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, Berryman began work on a few stanzas that marked the tentative beginning of the long poem that would occupy much of his thought over the next decade and a half. Arising, in all probability, out of a manuscript of unpublished dream analysis that he had given the title *St. Pancras Braser*, but inspired also by the complex psychoanalytical work that formed the centerpiece of his critical biography of Stephen Crane published in 1950, *The Dream Songs* would complete the task that Berryman had begun with *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and permanently alter our understanding of the nature and limits of the American long poem. At once seductively playful and intellectually challenging in its range of social, cultural, political, and philosophical references and allusions, *The Dream Songs* has nevertheless been surprisingly slow in inspiring the kind of serious theoretical engagement that has marked much contemporary literary study. Preferring instead to read *The Dream Songs* in terms of the development of Confessional poetry, much analysis has failed to consider the inadequacy of certain interpretive labels in themselves and the necessarily reductive readings they encourage. Future Berryman criticism will surely seek to move analysis of his work beyond the ostensibly biographical focus of Confessional analysis and explore some of the deeper issues that *The Dream Songs* addresses, issues concerning the relationship between self and society, race and history, the ethics and politics of literary production, and the borders and origins of American postmodernism.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Berryman was admitted to the hospital for alcoholism on numerous occasions. Indeed, from 1959 until the end of his life, he was hospitalized at least once a year. Through the break-up of his first and second marriages (in 1953 he became separated from Eileen Mulligan and in 1956 married Ann Levine, from whom he was divorced in 1959), Berryman nevertheless remained active and creative throughout the last and most difficult decade of his life. His success in that final decade was in part related to the dedication of his third wife, Kate Donahue, whom he married in 1961 and with whom he set up house in Minneapolis in 1964. In 1966, Berryman spent an important year living in Dublin, where he attempted to finish *The Dream*

Songs and oversaw the publication of a collection of *Short Poems* (which included the 1958 chapbook *His Thought Made Pockets and the Plane Buckt* and the significant elegy on the death of John F. Kennedy, "Formal Elegy") and, 20 years after their composition, *Berryman's Sonnets*. In 1969, Berryman was awarded the National Book Award and the Bollingen Prize for *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest,* the final collection (the last four books) of *The Dream Songs;* he was also made a Regents' Professor of Humanities at the University of Minnesota in the same year.

Love and Fame, first published in 1970, was the last of Berryman's books published during his lifetime. It was also the book that, in a sense, revealed the poet's disillusionment with the attention and fame that the success of *The Dream Songs,* in particular, had brought him. The retrospective structure of the first three sections of *Love and Fame* exposes a figure intent on refiguring his past as part of a movement toward spiritual illumination and transcendence. The surface autobiographical focus of the book, however, yields to a deeper allegorical plane of meaning where Berryman suggests that modern man is in a state of spiritual and ethical crisis. This is most evident in poems such as "Have a Genuine American Horror-&-Mist on the Rocks" and "To a Woman," but it is also present in the sequence "Eleven Addresses to the Lord," which ends the book, where the poet cries out for a god of rescue. Such divine intervention, however, never came for Berryman, and on the morning of 7 January 1972 he leapt to his death from the Washington Avenue Bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis.

Berryman's posthumous works have been many and varied. *Delusions, Etc.,* published in the year of Berryman's death, is a book of poems that, although very uneven, contains many important pieces, such as his elegies for Dylan Thomas and Georg Trakl, and *Opus Dei,* the nine-part "layman's winter mockup" that begins the book. The latter piece, when considered alongside "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" from *Love and Fame,* confirms Berryman's position as one of the most important religious poets of the 20th century. In 1973, *Recovery,* an unfinished novel that deals in painful detail with Berryman's treatment for alcoholism and his involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous, was published with an introduction by Saul Bellow. A collection of prose, *The Freedom of the Poet* (which includes the important interview-essay "One Answer to a Question: Changes" and the short story "The Imaginary Jew"), was published in 1976. *Henry's Fate, and Other Poems (1967–1972),* a collection of some of the Dream Songs that Berryman had culled from the earlier work, was published in 1977. Berryman's impressive contribution to Shakespeare scholarship was published as *Berryman's Shakespeare* in 1999 and was enthusiastically welcomed by Shakespeare scholar Anne Barton in the *New York Review of Books* (23 November 1999) and by Hugh Kenner in the *Times Literary Supplement* (17 September 1999). Considering Berryman's posthumous publication profile, one cannot help but feel that, had he not met the tragic end he did, he would almost certainly have grown into the same late brilliance as his esteemed precursor, W.B. Yeats.

Berryman's career as a poet and scholar, like Yeats' in some respects, vacillated between periods of suffering and success, frequently misperceived personal failure, and sometimes overwhelming public fame. Regarded by Donald Davie (1976) as "not only one of the most gifted and intelligent Americans of his time, but also one of the most honorable and responsible," Berryman may finally be read as a writer less concerned with the details of his private life and more with the changing climate of American cultural life during his relatively brief but highly productive career. Contrary to the stubbornly dominant critical view that Berryman was principally a Confessional poet, a label against which he railed "with rage and contempt" in a *Paris Review* interview toward the end of his life (reprinted in Thomas, 1988), recent studies have suggested that his work may be read as a significant register of American cultural feeling in the decades following World War II, poems that probe the workings of the inner mental and emotional life while simultaneously gauging the contemporary social weather.

PHILIP COLEMAN

See also Confessional Poetry

Biography

Born John Allyn Smith in McAlester, Oklahoma, 25 October 1914. Attended Columbia College, New York (Rensselaer Prize, 1935), 1932–36, A.B. 1936 (Phi Beta Kappa); Clare College, Cambridge (Kellett fellow, 1936–37, Oldham Shakespeare scholar, 1937), 1937–38, B.A. 1938; Instructor in English, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, 1939–40, and Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1940–43; Instructor in English, 1943, Associate in Creative Writing, 1946–47, Resident Fellow, 1948–49, and Hodder Fellow, 1950–51, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey; Lecturer in English, University of Washington, Seattle, 1950; Elliston Professor of Poetry, University of Cincinnati, 1952; creative writing teacher, University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1954; Assistant Professor, 1955–56, Associate Professor, 1957–62, Professor, 1962–72, and Regents' Professor of Humanities, 1969–72, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; United States Information Service Lecturer, India, 1957; Visiting Professor, University of California, Berkeley, 1960, and Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, 1962–63; poetry editor, *The Nation,* 1939. Received Rockefeller fellowship, 1944–46, 1956; Shelley Memorial Award, 1949; Levinson Prize (*Poetry,* Chicago), 1950; Guggenheim fellowship, 1952, 1966; Harriet Monroe Award, 1957; Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, 1959; Ingram Merrill Foundation grant, 1964; Loines Award, 1964; Pulitzer Prize, 1965; Academy of American Poets fellowship, 1967; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1967, and senior fellowship, 1971; Bollingen Prize, 1969; National Book Award, 1969; honorary Litt.D., Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, 1971; member, American Academy, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Academy of American Poets; Chancellor, Academy of American Poets, 1968. Died in Minneapolis, Minnesota, 7 January 1972.

Poetry

Five Young American Poets (with others), 1940
Poems, 1942
The Dispossessed, 1948
Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, 1956
Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, and Other Poems, 1959
77 Dream Songs, 1964
Berryman's Sonnets, 1967
Short Poems, 1967
His Toy, His Dream, His Rest: 308 Dream Songs, 1968
The Dream Songs, 1969

Love and Fame, 1970; revised edition, 1972
Delusions, Etc., 1972
Selected Poems, 1938–1968, 1972
Henry's Fate, and Other Poems (1967–1972), edited by John Haffenden, 1977
Collected Poems, 1934–1972, edited by Charles Thornbury, 1986

Selected Criticism
The Freedom of the Poet, 1976
Berryman's Shakespeare, 1999

Other Writings: novel (*Recovery,* 1973), biography (*Stephen Crane,* 1950); edited collections of literature (*The Arts of Reading* [with Ralph Ross and Allen Tate], 1960).

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The Dream Songs

The Dream Songs (1969) was originally published in two collections: the Pulitzer Prize–winning *77 Dream Songs* (1964) and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968). Between the publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956) and *77 Dream Songs* Berryman had begun experimenting with the three six-line stanza form in which the Songs, with some minor exceptions, are written. This poetic form, together with the poetic persona of Henry in *The Dream Songs,* would dominate Berryman's career, and further Songs were planned for publication in the provisionally titled collections "Addenda" and "Parega." The character of Henry rises again in the poems published posthumously in 1977, *Henry's Fate, and Other Poems (1967–1972),* five years after Berryman's suicide.

77 Dream Songs maps the first three of the entire collection's seven books, with each book in this first volume containing 26, 25, and 26 Songs respectively. Although a noted stylist and poetic technician in his other collections and his criticism, Berryman's systematic structuring of the remaining sections of *The Dream Songs* became more haphazard: the four books of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* contain 14, 54, 133, and 107 poems respectively.

The Dream Songs is not a comprehensible and unified text nor does it seek to provide a coherent, easy read as "Dream Song 366" testifies: "These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand. / They are only meant to terrify & comfort." The work's open-ended nature, the initially difficult syntax and thought processes at work, and the occasional failure (particularly in the later books) to remain within the three six-line stanza form make this a text that demands attention and repeated reading. Moreover, understanding an individual Song in isolation from its placement within a section or indeed within the collection as a whole is difficult: Berryman structured this poetic event around a high degree of textual interdependency and cross-reference. Many of the early critical appraisals dwelt on the biographical similarities between Berryman and his character Henry in the Songs, but more recent scholarship has opened up the discussions of Berryman's text to a range of textual and theoretical analyses. *The Dream Songs* charts a set of alternative landscapes: the internal spaces of an individual psyche; real and tangible locations within the contemporary United States of Berryman's time; and considerations of political and cultural territories outside America, particularly in Europe and Asia, in the 1960s. Although the action that does occur throughout the 385 Dream Songs centers on the life and experiences of Henry, this is not to say that these poems are wholly divorced from an actual and realized social and political world. On the contrary, Berryman navigates a complex of interwoven themes, the dimensions of which incorporate the personal in conjunction with the universal, situating the private in tandem with the public. Central to this poetic project is the crisis of identity, in particular that of American identity in the 1960s following the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the nation's later involvement in the Vietnam War. An art of opposition and tension frames Berryman's work: alternative streams of philosophy and thought (Western as opposed to Eastern, psychoanalysis as against religion); competing individualized characters (Henry and his interlocutors throughout); an ordered presentation of "reality" clashing with the fragmented representations of such a reality. Each of the oppositions established by Berryman contributes to the construction of a unique poetic dynamic.

Originally planned as a creation epic, *The Dream Songs* operates ultimately (noted by Matterson in his study [1988]) as a survival epic. Many of the Songs are elegiac in mood, and Berryman will be remembered, among other things, as *the* elegist of his generation, the so-called "middle generation" of American poets. In his recollections of fellow writers such as Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, and Sylvia Plath, Berryman registers—through Henry—the fact of human survival amid the despair and disintegration of modern life. Each of the books either opens or closes with progression and continuance in the face of the tragic consequences of such continuation. Henry moves between the demands of calibrated time and the cyclical motion of the seasons as the recorder of the losses of this world, losses among which he is not numbered. Knowledge of the human condition and acceptance of the fallen state of mankind are central coordinates in the journeys