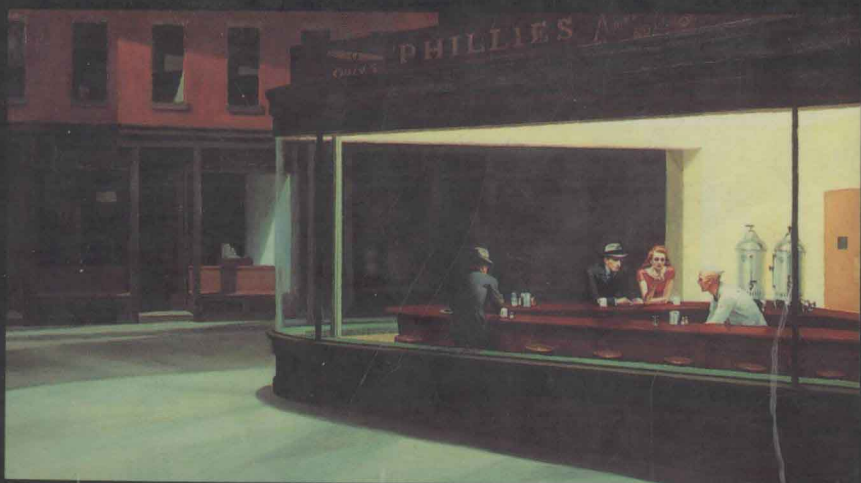


# American Poetry of the Twentieth Century

*Richard Gray*



*Longman Literature in English Series*

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# American Poetry of the Twentieth Century

Richard Gray



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The multi-volume Longman Literature in English Series provides students of literature with a critical introduction to the major genres in their historical and cultural context. Each volume gives a coherent account of a clearly defined area, and the series, when complete, will offer a practical and comprehensive guide to literature written in English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The aim of the series as a whole is to show that the most valuable and stimulating approach to literature is that based upon an awareness of the relations between literary forms and their historical context. Thus the areas covered by most of the separate volumes are defined by period and genre. Each volume offers new informed ways of reading literary works, and provides guidance to further reading in an extensive reference section.

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David Carroll  
Michael Wheeler

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## Author's Preface

The title of this book is, I hope self-explanatory: I have tried to offer a reasonably comprehensive account of the development of American poetry since the early years of this century. In doing so, I have also attempted to take account of the historical and cultural forces that have helped shape that poetry and to utilise recent theories concerning the relationship between text and context, literature and other dimensions of experience. I am painfully aware, as I write this, that there are many good poets who receive only passing mention or even no mention at all. Names like William Bronk, Maxine Kumin, and Audre Lord spring to mind immediately; the reader will undoubtedly think of many others. In extenuation of this, all I can plead is that any account of American poetry has to stop somewhere, to exclude a number of distinct and distinguished writers, if it is not to degenerate into a simple list of names. I am also aware, much less painfully, that my ambition first and last has been to concentrate on the individual poet and poem. It is the experience of reading the single poem, after all, and encountering the voice of a singular poet, that fires the reader's imagination into life; and so it is to this that any study of poetry must eventually return, no matter how detailed or protracted its investigation may be of poetry's social and ideological underpinnings.

I have accumulated many debts in the course of writing this book. I would like to thank the University of Essex for its generosity with sabbatical leave, and the many students at Essex – particularly those in the M.A. course in American poetry – from whom I have learned over the years. I would also like to express my gratitude for the financial assistance I have received from the university, which has enabled me to pursue at least part of my research in the United States. Above all, there are the personal debts. I would like to thank Sylvia Sparrow for patiently typing the several drafts of this book and, in the process, having to decipher my almost illegible script. I would like to thank Arthur Terry for his informed advice and the loan of many useful books, Joe Allard for helping me to understand just how complex a fate it is to be an American, and George Dekker and Lindajo Bartho-

lomew for their kindness and hospitality. I would, finally, like to thank Gordon Brotherston, Herbie Butterfield, Cherry Good, Jack Hill, Haytham Mahfoud, Dennis Reid, Kate Rhodes, Tjebbe Westendorp and Dudley Young for the many conversations I have had with them: conversations that have given me whatever insights I now enjoy into literature in general and poetry in particular. Good friends all, these and many others have made the writing of this book an education and an almost unequivocal pleasure.

Richard Gray  
Wivenhoe, Essex



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TO  
BEN AND CATHARINE  
AND  
MY FATHER AND MOTHER

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# Contents

Longman Literature in English Series viii

Editor's Preface x

Author's Preface xi

Acknowledgements xiii

## **1 Backgrounds: America, The Poem, and The Twentieth Century 1**

America the poem: ideas of America and its writing 1

America's poets: formative figures for the twentieth century 19

America and modernism: new readings of reality 29

America and 'revolution': new frontiers for art 38

## **2 The Modernist Experiment: Imagism, Objectivism, and some Major Innovators 49**

Imagism: the social and cultural situation 49

The significance of Imagism 52

From Imagism to Objectivism or Dream: H. D., Zukofsky, Oppen, Reznikoff, Niedecker, Fletcher, Aiken 57

From Imagism to the redemption of history: Pound 73

From Imagism to contact and community: Williams 82

From Imagism to discovery of the imagination: Stevens 88

## **3 In Search of a Past: the Fugitive Movement and the Major Traditionalists 101**

Traditionalism: the social and cultural situation 101

The significance of the Fugitives 106

Traditionalism and the South: Ransom, Tate, Davidson, Warren, J. P. Bishop, Berry, Dickey 109

Traditionalism outside the South: Winters, Cunningham,  
Eberhart 125

Traditionalism, scepticism, and tragedy: Frost 131

Traditionalism, quiet desperation, and belief: Robinson 138

Traditionalism, inhumanism, and prophecy: Jeffers 145

#### **4 The Traditions of Whitman: Other Poets from between the Wars 157**

The language of crisis and the language of Whitman: other aspects of the social and cultural situation between the wars 159

Whitman and the shape of American poetry 161

Whitman and American populism: Sandburg, Lindsay, Masters 162

Whitman and American radicalism: Rexroth, MacLeish, Fearing, Patchen 168

Whitman and American identity: Hughes, Johnson, Cullen, Tolson, Hayden, Brooks, and the question of black poetry 176

Whitman and American individualism: Moore, Wylie, Millay, Miles, Bogan, Adams 184

Whitman and American experimentalism: cummings 194

Whitman and American mysticism: Rukeyser, Riding, Crane 199

#### **5 Formalists and Confessionals: American Poetry since the Second World War 214**

From abundance to anger: the social and cultural tendencies of the first two decades after the war 214

From the mythological eye to the lonely 'I': a progress of American poetry since the war 218

Varieties of the personal: the self as dream, landscape, or confession 225

From formalism to freedom: a progress of American poetic techniques since the war 231

The imagination of commitment: a progress of American poetic themes since the war 238

The uses of formalism: Bishop, and others 243

The confessional 'I' as primitive: Roethke 247

The confessional 'I' as historian: Lowell 251

The confessional 'I' as martyr: Berryman 256

The confessional 'I' as prophetess: Plath 260

New formalists, new confessionals: recent departures 264

**6 Beats, Prophets, and Aesthetes: American Poetry since the Second World War 273**

From the public to the personal: social and cultural tendencies of the Sixties and after 273

Rediscovering the American voice: the Black Mountain poets (Olson, J. Williams, Levertov, Blackburn, Wieners, Creeley, Dorn, Duncan) 279

Restoring the American vision: the San Francisco poets (Ferlinghetti, Everson, Spicer, Lamantia, Whalen, McClure, Snyder) 291

Re-creating American rhythms: the Beat poets (Ginsberg, Corso) and Bukowski 299

Resurrecting the American rebel: black poetry (Baraka, Kaufman, Joans, Evans, Sanchez, Giovanni, Mahubuti, Karenga, Nelson) 307

Reinventing the American self: the New York poets (O'Hara, Guest, Schuyler, Berrigan, Koch, Ashbery) and Merrill 315

Postscript: America a poem 328

**Appendix: The problem of literary nationality: the case of T. S. Eliot 336**

**Chronology 347**

**General Bibliographies 366**

- (i) Bibliographies and reference guides 366
- (ii) Literary, historical and cultural backgrounds 367
- (iii) History and criticism 372
- (iv) Some useful anthologies 379

**Individual Authors 381**

Notes on biography, major works, and criticism 381

**Index 420**



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## Chapter 1

# Backgrounds: America, The Poem, and The Twentieth Century

### America the poem: ideas of America and its writing

'America is a poem in our eyes: its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres'. The words are those of Ralph Waldo Emerson, from an essay entitled 'The Poet' published in 1844, and they sum up that desire to turn the New World into words which has seized the imagination of so many Americans. The wilderness of North America had seemed strange from the beginning, the first days of white colonisation. This was a 'silent country', observed one settler (conveniently ignoring the Indians) and it seemed positively to need language to fill the void, to give it identity and shape. After the founding of the republic, language was called on to perform another task as well, which was to help the infant American nation articulate its destiny. 'We have yet had no genius in America', declared Emerson:

. . . which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admired in Homer . . . <sup>1</sup>

That genius would come, Emerson and others believed, to turn the disparate facts of American historical experience into a coherent story, a heroic narrative with a beginning, middle, and a millennial end. In creating this epic of the new republic such a genius would, it was hoped, do something still further, perhaps more pressing and certainly more personal: he, or she, would tell Americans something about their individual selves. 'The American is a new man', St. Jean de Crèvecoeur proclaimed in 1782, 'who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions.'<sup>2</sup> The idea was simple, radical, and surely true: in committing themselves to what they