

FROM THE

*Academy of American Poets*

# *f*IFTY YEARS OF AMERICAN POETRY

OVER 200 IMPORTANT WORKS BY AMERICA'S MODERN MASTERS



**W.H. Auden**

**e.e. cummings**

**Robert Frost**

**Archibald**

**MacLeish**

**Marianne Moore**

**Sylvia Plath**

**Ezra Pound**

**Carl Sandburg**

**William Carlos Williams**

**Charles**

**Wright**

**and many others**

**With an Introduction by**

*Robert Penn Warren*

*Fifty  
Years  
of  
American  
Poetry*

ANNIVERSARY VOLUME FOR THE  
ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS

INTRODUCTION BY  
ROBERT PENN WARREN

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**FIFTY YEARS OF AMERICAN POETRY**  
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# INTRODUCTION

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This is the semi-centennial of The Academy of American Poets, and this anthology, created at the suggestion of Harry N. Abrams, Inc., the distinguished publishing house, and the Book-of-the-Month Club, is one of the various celebrations of that event. In it are represented, with one poem each, the Chancellors, Fellows, and Award Winners since 1934—a hundred and twenty-six poets in all—a sort of cross-section of American poetry in the last half-century. A glance at the table of contents will show that no one school, bailiwick, method, or category of poetry has dominated the interest of the Academy. The Academy has been interested in poetry, not in cults or schools, in helping, as best it could, though no doubt with some human failing, serious poets of whatsoever persuasion.

What does the Academy do? According to its certificate of incorporation, its purpose is "To encourage, stimulate, and foster the production of American poetry. . . ." The responsibility for its activities lies with the Board of Directors (with Mrs. Hugh Bullock as president and many board members of distinguished reputation) and the Board of twelve Chancellors, which has included, over the years, such figures as Louise Bogan, W.H. Auden, Witter Bynner, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Robinson Jeffers, Marianne Moore, James Merrill, Robert Fitzgerald, F.O. Matthiessen, and Archibald MacLeish—certainly not members of the same poetic church. The primary duty of the Chancellors is to determine the winners of the various Fellowship Awards and, upon request, to advise the Board of Directors. As for the Fellowships, from 1937 to 1969, the value of each was \$5,000, and since then \$10,000. The first Fellowship was awarded in 1947 to Edgar Lee Masters, a prefatory award

having been made in 1937 to Edwin Markham. To date there are forty-seven Fellows.

Very significantly, the Academy has tried to reach beyond the professional level to the young, from whom the new poets must spring, or the new readers of poetry. For instance, the program of Poetry-in-the-Schools, fostered by the Academy, is now national. Furthermore, the Academy has assumed that its mission is not "Eastern provincial," as the awards and the books vouched for by the Academy and its various other activities clearly show. Behind all of these lies the assumption that poetry is not for poets only, but for readers, and that the cultivation of readers—the explanation of what poetry really is, what and how it "means," what it is about, how it may affect the reader—is essential for the health of poetry.

American education has become debased in this department since the old-fashioned days when, in almost all grades, there were usually required recitations of memorized poems, and often a discussion of them. We may compare the present perfunctory attention to poetry to the French system by which poems, even in early grades, simple for the very young, but by a master, must be memorized each week, recited, and then analyzed in a written theme based on specific questions. To have great poets there must be great audiences, Whitman said, to the more or less unheeding ears of American educators. Ambitiously, hopefully, the Academy has undertaken to remedy this plight.

Let us look back a half century to the moment in which the Academy was founded. At that time the modern poetic revolution was already here. Robinson, the forerunner, had only a year or so to live. Frost was at the height of his fame, as was Eliot. Hart Crane was already dead. Ransom had written most of his poems. William Carlos Williams pub-

lished his first *Collected Poems*, with an introduction by Wallace Stevens, almost simultaneously with the founding of the Academy. A new generation, offspring of that revolution, was about to appear.

The fact of such a background in no way diminishes the importance of the founding of the Academy, even though it may have given preparation for it. To those already sunk in poetry, it had been an exhilarating period, but many literates, or semi-such readers, and many established professors had not heard the news (except for Robinson and Frost, and more remotely the rumor of Eliot), or took it as bad news. There were not many F.O. Matthiessens and Cleanth Brookses around in those days. Furthermore, most graduate students, even in important universities, were above such trivialities, a fact I can vouch for from my own experience. In other words, most of the poetic ferment had been in the scum afloat at the top of the pot and not in the heart of the brew. This is not, however, to say that many writers or readers who felt the necessity of the achievements of modernism were not solidly, or adequately, grounded in the old literature and devoted to it. They simply felt, instinctively, that literature must be a constantly expanding growth in a world of inevitable change. The Academy recognized the inevitability of change, and that literature is an expanding growth, as the limited tenure of Chancellors most obviously testifies. The poetry of today is not that of the 1920s and 1930s, and certain contemporary poets of real achievement find little or no direct inspiration from that earlier revolution.

If we look for the genesis of the Academy, we see a young woman, Marie Graves, of French birth but American parentage, raised in France (except for the years of World War I), steeped in music from all the festivals of Europe,



from study, and from the musicians, along with artists and writers, frequenting the house of her family, and those of their friends. And there was, too, the Sorbonne.

When, in 1933, she married an American, Mr. Hugh Bullock, and came to New York, she was in for a surprise. "I found no poets (or other artists) at social events I attended in New York City, as I had done constantly on the Continent; and when poets I had looked forward to hearing in class [she had registered at Columbia] were not given time off from such jobs as soda-fountain jerk, or salesman in a clothing store, to come and read, my sense of artistic appreciation, nurtured in Europe, was immensely outraged."

She knew, of course, that things much more important than social life were involved; that situation was merely a symptom. Life itself—bread—was involved. Poverty was a common lot for poets unless they had the stamina to carry a job, menial or not, or a profession, with poetry an occupation of stolen time. Yes, there had been hungry and shabby poets even in France—the Nervals and Verlaines, the poets *maudits*. (Though Verlaine, in old age, did receive some private help.) And the same was true of England, from Chatterton to Francis Thompson, for example. The Continent was a little short of Utopia. But on that Continent there was a much more widespread, even official, recognition of poetry, and the other arts, as a basic national asset. In the early 1930s, a friend of mine, a poet of high reputation, was living with his family in a small French village, where he was often seen publicly carrying garbage from the kitchen. A delegation of the ladies of the village called on my friend's wife, and finally worked up the courage to tell her that it was not seemly for a poet to be seen in that role; it gave the village a bad name. Comedy, yes. But something else, too.

Even though poetry was regarded in various European countries as a national asset, prime ministers and bureaucrats did not necessarily retain much more than the fading recollection of it from the lycée or university; however, they knew an asset when they saw it. And a number of high officials have been writers of stature, most recently and famously St. John Perse as a poet, and Winston Churchill as a historian and prose stylist.

The long tradition of patronage, as Mrs. Bullock well knew, runs from the Greeks to modern Europe, accounting, quite literally, for many world masterpieces. Though the private patron survived, the governments themselves were assuming more and more responsibility. In England, from the late Middle Ages, private bounty was not uncommon and eventually the Crown provided substantial subsidy, and in the following centuries, along with much important private munificence, there was a drift toward a consistent governmental patronage, ending in the annual Civil List—where once a name is inscribed, an annuity follows for life.

It is true that in America, in the nineteenth century, the government occasionally appointed a literary man to a post at home, most famously the Custom House, or abroad as a consul, Hawthorne having served, not always happily or productively, in both capacities. But we remember that the great Melville, fallen on evil days, served in the Custom House in New York—though not as a political appointee—grubbing away for many years at \$4.00 a day, working at his poetry at night.

It was not until Theodore Roosevelt that an American poet received government patronage with any degree of understanding. When Robinson was in middle life, the author of only two books, a son of Roosevelt called the president's attention to one of them, *Children of the Night*, which

the youth admired. The father, that strange combination of a sprawling diversity of qualities, recognized the talent in the poems and arranged an interview with the poet in which he said, "I regret that no Civil List exists in this country as in England and elsewhere. In its absence, I am forced to offer you a post in the Custom House. If you accept it, I urge you to put poetry first and the United States Treasury second." Apparently Robinson followed that advice, and a score of volumes followed—and great fame.

Theodore Roosevelt has had no successor of the same kidney.

Our government has, however, lately shown a new awareness of the arts, and has a number of very definite achievements to its credit. We should, of course, be grateful for this fact, and should hope for permanence and development. But should we assume that a political solution, however high-minded, is adequate? Certainly such a program would be the most vulnerable when budget-cutters get to work. That, however, is not my real point. Private aid to the arts seems to be more in the American individualistic tradition. Even a great foundation represents an individual's sense of values. And the individual who writes a \$10.00 check for The Academy of American Poets has, however slightly, a new relation to the art of poetry; it is, in a sense, "his." This is not to say that poetry or the reading of it should be the primary concern of mankind: but it is an activity, for writer or reader, valuable and unique, and a fundamental measure of the quality of any civilization.

I may seem to have wandered far from the founding of the Academy, but much of what I have said presumably lies in the background of that event, and in the Founder's determination, in her first distress about the American scene, to try "to do something about it." First, for discussion and

advice, she turned to the poets she had, in fact, met, among whom were Robinson, Ridgely Torrence (poetry editor of the *New Republic*), Joseph Auslander (a teacher of hers at Columbia). Then, on the practical side, there was her husband, with his knowledge of the world of finance and law (and whose commitment was to grow to the point where he served as Secretary of the Academy). Those early days of struggle and hope come now to the Founder's mind: "We used many odd means to try to secure interest and funds. . . . It was hard work. I well remember the first early contributions, and how exciting it was to receive the first \$50.00 or \$100.00 check. And how much it meant when a bricklayer sent a \$1.00 bill, because he 'loved poetry.'" It is easy to understand the symbolic weight of that \$1.00, a meaning deeper, and more justifying, than that of munificent impersonal gifts from great corporations or foundations or governmental agencies.

The Academy has long since become a significant American institution. The originally vague, but dauntless, impulse "to do something about it" took form, bit by bit, with the aid of many other dauntless hearts and able workers. And here should be mentioned Elizabeth Kray, who, for many years, ingeniously and devotedly committed herself and her great skills to the office of Executive Director.

It is hard to think back to the time, which some of us can still remember, when a public poetry reading was a rarity and, when one did occur, was often the subject of a jest. But now they are numberless, good and bad, in all sorts of places, and usually to well populated or packed houses. And not uncommonly universities, great and famous or small, welcome poets to their faculties. But these items are merely symptoms of a change in American society—society in the broadest sense—to which the Academy has so vitally con-



tributed. We should remember, however, that the Academy is engaged in a mission that is endless. That mission is as endless as we hope our civilization to be.

*Robert Penn Warren*  
*Vermont, Spring 1984*

## PREFACE

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On November 7, 1934, The Academy of American Poets was incorporated in Albany, New York, as a "Membership Corporation." Thus began an exciting fifty years of activity to secure assistance for programs for poetry.

It wasn't easy. Poets had not taken their place in the American way of life. The average American did not reel off poems the way Italians knew Dante from memory and French people recited Racine and Corneille or the more lyric Alfred de Musset, or the British quoted Shakespeare and Byron.

Walt Whitman had made a deep impression but Emerson's easiest lines repeated often were usually prose, and except for parroting Poe's "Raven," nobody thought much about American poetry. Life was too busy.

Nevertheless in these fifty years The Academy of American Poets has awarded forty-seven Fellowships totaling over \$300,000; awarded thirty Lamont Poetry Selection prizes, ten Walt Whitman Awards, and five Landon Translation Award books each with \$1,000 prizes.

The College Poetry Prizes, established in 1954 with ten awards, now function in 131 universities and colleges and annually draw 4,000 competitors.

The Academy also initiated the first Poetry-in-the-Schools program and a number of other activities all over the United States. Poetry readings, historical presentations, walks, and especially Affiliated Societies are numbered amongst these.

In this Fiftieth Anniversary year, celebrated nationally by libraries and individuals, the Academy seeks to tell of its appreciation to the many people and organizations who have helped us on our way.

We particularly thank our Chancellors and Fellows who

have by their presence and support enhanced all such events.

And we want to express to Mr. Paul Gottlieb of Harry N. Abrams, Inc., our deep appreciation for the brilliant idea of initiating this unusual poetry anthology in celebration of our fifty years of work for poetry.

*Marie Bullock*

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